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WANDERING ALONG THE WAY OF  
*Okinawan Karate*

THINKING ABOUT GOJU-RYU

GILES HOPKINS



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# **Wandering Along the Way of Okinawan Karate**

*Thinking about Goju-Ryu*

Giles Hopkins



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*To all those who walked this way before me and those whom I've  
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# Introduction

The starlings are back. They come in the afternoon usually. Hundreds of them sweep down in noisy gangs like vigilantes from the Old West, storming into town, riding roughshod and shooting up the local saloon before they ride off, perching in my neighbor's giant catalpa tree as if they were surveying the territory, deciding what field or grassy knoll to plunder next.

I don't see these birds off in the forests, though I'm not exactly sure why. Perhaps they're wanderers or more given to this marauding lifestyle. After all, they're an invasive species, introduced to America back in 1890 by the American Acclimatization Society, led by Eugene Schieffelin, who, a big fan of the Bard's, had decided that the mission of the society should be to introduce to America every bird mentioned in Shakespeare's plays—a notion so wonderfully romantic and misguided at the same time. Thankfully, they don't seem to feel at home in the woods. Besides, I don't know whether the woodland birds would tolerate all this racket. There must be an unwritten agreement among all the forest animals that the woods are a quiet zone, a sort of natural library, a place to think. At least that's how I look at it.

I've spent the last few years, ever since I retired from teaching, walking in the woods of the Fitzgerald Lake Conservation Area and the Mount Tom State Reservation. The trails wind through stands of oak and maple and hickory and hills covered with hemlock and white pine. There are swamps and lakes and rocky bluffs. Here is where, for an hour or two, I can escape the rancorous noise of civilization and let my mind wander. And what I often find myself thinking about is the martial arts in general and the classical (or *koryu*) kata of Okinawan Goju-ryu karate in particular.

Of course, when I first began training in the martial arts, back in the early 1970s, I didn't actually *think* about karate. I stood in line with everyone else and just followed the teacher. I learned the basics and how to count in Japanese and how to fold my *gi* after training. I learned how to tie a belt, eat with chopsticks, and sit for long periods of time in *seiza*, listening to stories

about all of the old teachers and what training was like in Okinawa in the old days. And, of course, I learned kata—training kata like Gekisai and Gekiha and Kakuha, classical kata like Sanchin and Seipai and Suparinpei, and what my teacher called “gift” kata like Naihanchin and Sochin and Hankutsuru No Mai.

In addition to the empty-hand kata, there were the weapons kata of Okinawan *kobudo* because my teacher, Kimo Wall, had also spent a good deal of time with Matayoshi Shinpo sensei—the well-known weapons teacher and National Treasure of Okinawa. We trained *bo*, *sai*, *tonfa*, *nunchiyaku*, *eaku*, *kwa*, *kama*, and *sansetsukon*. I learned how to wrap *sai* handles, how to string the *nunchiyaku*, and how to cut the *tonfa* handle down so that it was a custom fit to my own hand. We broke weapons doing demonstrations, tore our *gi* in training, and wore out belts, but I never thought very much about what I was doing.

When I look back on it now, I realize that the training was hard, but it was also very basic. We trained five days a week for two hours each day. Sometimes, of course, we would train later, and often we would train on weekends because a few of us shared a house with Kimo sensei. We did a lot of conditioning and a lot of basics (*kihon*). Sometimes we would count around the entire dojo of fifty or sixty students, each student counting ten, doing front kicks (*mae geri*). We would regularly do ten sets of ten head punches (*jodan tsuki*) and the same for head blocks (*jodan uke*) and then continue with chest punches (*chudan tsuki*) and chest blocks (*chudan uke*) and down punches (*gedan tsuki*) and down blocks (*gedan uke*). And then we trained a lot of the *Gekisai* kata and their two-person sets, along with the other training subjects. This was fairly regular training for seven or eight years; stretching, push-ups, sit-ups, basics, training kata, and two-person sets. The training was heavy on fundamentals.

I had been training martial arts for ten years before I began practicing with Kimo sensei, but early on I realized that I didn’t know the first thing about fundamental technique. I had never paid much attention to posture and body alignment, I never thought about breathing, I had never heard (let alone experienced) a *kiai* that could freeze an opponent in place, and I didn’t know what real speed or power was. Endless rounds of basics are good for all of these fundamentals. It develops strength and good posture. It trains one’s spirit and stamina. It helps develop speed and focus technique.



But one must train mindfully. Any training that is done absentmindedly tends to become robotic and lifeless, with no real understanding of technique.

So I began to actually *think* about kata. When I wasn't training, I was often out in the woods, stumbling along, doing kata in my head, asking myself questions. Why did some kata begin with both arms up and others didn't? Were the steps and turns of kata significant? Why were some movements done slowly and others were fast? Why did some schools within the same tradition, doing the same kata, do some techniques differently? What role did tradition and lineage play? If Sanchin was so fundamental to Goju-ryu, what were the lessons it was trying to teach, and how were we meant to incorporate those lessons into each of the other kata? If the solo patterns of kata were a way to remember self-defense techniques or specific applications, what were the original applications (*bunkai*)? And, of course, why did everyone seem to have their own interpretations of kata? Were we really, as Miyagi Chojun sensei once stated, "walking in the dark without a lantern"?

Perhaps, but there were some signposts. I began to notice that all of the moves in kata were not the same—some were obviously blocking or receiving techniques (*uke*), some were bridging or controlling techniques, and some were finishing techniques. The implication, of course, was that there were a limited number of sequences of techniques strung together in kata, and that each technique was there for a specific purpose. But I also noticed that not all kata sequences seemed to be so easily discernible as, for example, Seipai. Kata structure seemed to vary; some techniques, particularly sequence ending techniques, might be shown only after the second repetition of a controlling or bridging technique. This sort of structure complicated any deconstruction of kata, but it was readily apparent when one looked at the repetition of certain sequences, showing the same techniques done on both the right and left sides except for a single technique—a *mawashi* in Cat Stance (*neko ashi dachi*), for example, shown after the second sequence.

It was about this time that I began writing about kata and *bunkai*. At first, like so many others, I tried to imagine all of the possible ways a given technique from kata might be applied. Kata can be a fertile playground for the imagination. Before I knew it, I had an encyclopedia of self-defense

techniques. However, the problem, I soon realized, was that no one could really draw from such a collection of techniques in the instant that one might need to defend oneself. Such an exercise might be fun training in the dojo but was it really the original intent of kata, to be all things to all people? It didn't make much sense that whoever put these kata together in the first place had constructed kata with such generic movements that they could be interpreted in so many different ways, I reasoned. There must be principles and themes. After all, each kata seemed to comprise a limited number of sequences, usually three or four but no more than five. And what held them together was that they each seemed to explore a theme (like the grab-release techniques of Seiunchin, for example) and follow the same principles (block the arms but go for the head). Even the fact that they were all put together in the same system seemed to be an important consideration if we were really to solve this enigma, to really understand kata and bunkai.

There were some caveats, however, that I stumbled across along the way, and it might benefit the reader to keep them in mind should he or she embark on the same journey. Great care should be taken to let go of preconceived notions of what Goju-ryu is and what it is not—and by extension, karate in general. One should always train with an open mind. One of the difficulties we often encounter is that the formalities of training, or what we are used to, get in the way. The kata itself has usually been taught in a specific way. The execution of the kata moves—particularly when the kata is performed within the dojo alongside others—sets up a rhythm that is at once metronomic and robotic. For teaching purposes, we may vary the speed within the kata and establish stopping points. All of this is artificial and, in fact, arbitrary to some extent. Kata is dynamic. If the techniques are done against an attacker, they will flow in a continuous and uninterrupted stream. Pauses and gaps in technique, or more specifically within the sequences of kata—what one sees in kata performance—would provide openings for an attacker. And though we may realize this, when it becomes ingrained in kata we tend not to see the connections between techniques—we tend not to see the techniques as combinations of moves against a single attacker. This is not meant to suggest that kata form is arbitrary. That, I believe, would be a particularly egregious misreading. While the altering, however slight, of kata movement can lead one down a number of interesting paths, discovering all sorts of unique “applications,” this is not what I am suggesting. To discover the original intent of the

techniques in any kata—what I would suggest is the primary bunkai—an application should adhere as closely as possible to the kata. The attempt is to discover what the kata is trying to show us. In most cases, this is hidden only if we don't apply the principles.

So this is what I have been attempting to understand in my own training and in writing about Goju-ryu—the original intent of kata. It has sometimes seemed to occupy an inordinate amount of time, for when I'm not actually training, I often find myself thinking about kata. In this book, I have collected many of the blog posts I have written over the years, mostly about technique but also about training, traditions, and the martial arts in general. Some of my ideas about kata and bunkai have changed over the years. I think that's to be expected. I've tried to include these ideas here, but as I continue to train and learn, my thoughts about Goju may continue to change and develop, though not drastically, I'm sure. The fundamental understanding of the classical kata of Goju-ryu that I have tried to put into words here is, I believe, correct. But our understanding of things generally deepens with time. And certainly one of the reasons I'm interested in writing about kata at all is so that others may continue to study the art and perhaps throw a little more light on the trail for all of us.

# SUMMER



*The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness.*

—JOHN MUIR

## Don't Hit Anyone

Sometimes I head off into the woods just to escape. Even here, a couple of miles from downtown in the woods of our local conservation area, I can get far enough up the trails that I can't hear the highway. At certain times of year, with its mix of oaks and hemlocks and pines, it's even hard to see the occasional airplane above the canopy of trees here, and one can almost imagine walking through primordial forests. Perhaps the sound of cars in the distance or the planes overhead is just the flatulence of the gods.

The trees, of course, are peaceful beings. If you walk in the woods often enough, especially in the spring or early summer, you can see them come alive again after a long winter. There aren't too many examples of living things that simply exist in harmony with their environment, living peacefully. Trees seem to. Of course I don't think trees are sentient beings. There's certainly a lot we don't know about our world—it would be arrogant to think otherwise—but I'm pretty sure trees aren't self-aware, though I'll keep an open mind on the subject. But at least in some imaginative or metaphorical way they present us with a wonderful example of peaceful coexistence, like that tree in the Shel Silverstein book *The Giving Tree*.

I was thinking about all of this because we seem to be living in strange times, though that's only a euphemism for all the anger and distrust and aggressively antagonistic posturing. Though again, I don't imagine we're so unique in that; all ages, I think, see turmoil and change and imagine that "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness ..." as Dickens said. But I'm reminded of the words of Miyagi Chojun sensei that often accompany a frequently reproduced portrait of him: "Do not strike others; do not be struck by others." Wonderful sentiment. I think the trees would approve. But this from a Goju-ryu karate master? Is there something just a bit ironic in this statement? What was he thinking?



*Figure 1-1 Miyagi Chojun sensei.*

I wonder sometimes if he was at all bothered by the violent nature of the martial arts and particularly some of the violent head-twisting techniques found in the classical kata of Goju-ryu. After all, these techniques, so prevalent in the finishing movements of the koryu kata, are intended to break the neck of the attacker. Granted, these techniques and applications were no doubt intended for a far more violent time, but Miyagi sensei himself, in the early part of the twentieth century, did not live in a world necessarily populated by bandits and highwaymen any more than most of us do. What need did he have for practicing a system of self-defense that was so lethal?



**Figure 1-2** Double-arm receiving technique from Sanseiru. This is the starting position for each of the bunkai sequences of Sanseiru kata.



**Figure 1-3** This is the controlling technique from the first sequence of Sanseiru kata, where the arm bar is used to bring the opponent down. The kata sequence continues with a knee kick to the ribs and a head-twisting neck break, but if we stop at the controlling technique, our response may be sufficient and certainly less violent.

I have often wondered if there was any way to minimize the violence inherent in the kata. There have been times when I have explained the applications of a kata to people and they will say, “We can’t do that. I can’t break someone’s neck if I get into a fight.” But it may say more about how we look to interact with other people, I think. We live in an angry age, where everyone seems ready to pick a fight—we just don’t want to hurt the other person too badly. Is it at all ironic that if we lived in ancient times we might actually be nicer to each other and reserve our martial arts for life-threatening situations?

But I still think if we adhere to Miyagi sensei’s advice, then what we should spend the most time studying and training in the classical subjects are the receiving techniques and the controlling or bridging techniques. If we can really learn the receiving techniques shown in the kata—how to



avoid and “block” the incoming attack—and bridge the distance to control the attacker, then we won’t get hit and we won’t necessarily need to hit anyone or break anyone’s neck. After all, the finishing techniques are easy, I always tell my students; the hard part is how to receive (uke) the attack safely and control the situation so that it doesn’t go any further. Whether I use a head-twisting technique to break someone’s neck or merely throw someone to the ground is really a matter of how much force or intention is put into the technique. Of course, the problem with so many of the finishing techniques in the classical subjects is that you have the opponent’s chin in one hand and the top of the head or hair in the other (the topknot in ancient times), and then you twist them in one direction or another. It may be difficult, in the heat of the moment, to do this gently.



**Figure 1-4** The final finishing technique from Seipai kata. The application of this technique is a neck break. The difficulty people often have in seeing bunkai clearly is that the techniques are so often disconnected from the previous receiving and controlling techniques.

Of course, in this day and age, it's very unlikely that I would be faced with any situation where I would have to make that choice. Well, unless someone were to jump out from behind that big hemlock tree and threaten me.

## Same Difference

I remember when we were little, when our parents would let us out and we would roam freely through the woods and fields. They expected we would come home for lunch whenever we got especially hungry. On summer evenings, we had to be in by dark. It was a different world, a different time. When I head off into the woods now, I generally stick to the trail. It might almost seem as though I'm headed somewhere—no longer running for a hollow tree glimpsed off in the distance or following a meandering stream. As long as I'm in the woods, it doesn't much matter to me where I am. I'm just content to plod along in the company of trees, without a hint of the grid-like overlay of civilization's labyrinth of roads and houses. I hear the echo of Bill Bryson's words: "However far or long you plod, you are always in the same place: in the woods," and that's enough. Though I've often felt that I could see the hint of a sneer on Bryson's face, as if he needed to shield himself against the criticism he anticipated from cynical urbanites.

Perhaps he didn't mean to imply anything in the least disparaging. His book, *A Walk in the Woods*, is wonderfully entertaining, though it seems to find much of its humor in the ineptitude of its protagonists, in the unlikeliness of their shared adventure to hike the Appalachian Trail. Yet I wonder why we should feel so out of place in these primal surroundings, which nowadays aren't even so primal anymore, now that we've fenced it all in and preserved it as a state park or labeled it a conservation area.

The other thing about that quote is that it makes it sound as though it's all the same, that it's all just a bunch of trees, one pretty much like the next. Sometimes I think this tendency to generalize, to smooth out all the rough edges and do away with differences, is quite human. I remember it was almost a common retort when we were children to respond to a friend who might correct something you said with the quick rejoinder, "Same difference." I'm sure that ended it when I was a child, though I'm not at all sure what it really means. But it got me thinking about the ways we tend to treat techniques in kata when they appear to be the same—that is, we assume that techniques that look the same must function the same in kata.



*Figure 1-5 Open-hand chest block from Shisochin.*

The open-hand “block” we see in Shisochin (fig. 1.5) is not the same, nor does it perform the same function, as the open-hand technique we see in the fifth and last sequence of Seipai kata (fig. 1.6). If we isolate the techniques, they appear to be the same, but each technique in kata is influenced by the techniques that precede it and the techniques that follow it in any given sequence. And the logic of this suggests that there may be slight variations in how each is performed—variations that differentiate it from techniques that only appear to be the same. The supposition, of course, is that there is no hard and fast alphabet of techniques that make up a single system of self-defense and that we are then meant to rearrange these techniques—as if we were forming words and sentences from letters—into various kata. Though this is exactly how we seem to think of “basic” techniques when we practice head blocks (jodan uke) and chest punches (chudan uke) and down blocks (gedan uke) and front kicks (mae geri) at the beginning of every class. Perhaps we don’t really stop to consider that these “basics” form a

very small percentage of the techniques found in the classical subjects of Goju-ryu.



*Figure 1-6 Open-hand “block” from the fifth sequence of Seipai.*

It is this bent of mind that tends to divorce kata technique from its application or bunkai. The open-hand techniques after the first turn in Seisan kata—turning to the south after the opening sequence of techniques in the front-facing line—are another example of this, I think. After the initial right arm circular block and the left palm strike to the opponent’s face,<sup>1</sup> the kata moves into a right-foot-forward Basic Stance while the left arm and left palm is brought down and the right arm and palm is brought up, finishing with the right palm rotated and facing forward. This same technique is done once more, stepping forward into a left-foot-forward Basic Stance (fig. 1.7), before pivoting to the right to finish the sequence with the “punches” and kick to the west.

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<sup>1</sup> In some schools the left hand also performs a block, suggesting that this initial technique is against a clinch, dealing with the opponent's two arms. However, in either case the remainder of the sequence conforms to the same bunkai.

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In some schools, these techniques are done twice—first stepping with the right and again stepping with the left—while in other schools they are done four times, twice with each hand and foot. In either case, the “message” of the kata is that the two techniques are meant to function together; that is, both are part of the controlling technique of the bunkai sequence, following the initial block and attack of the first technique that occurs on the turn. (The repetition of four of these techniques suggests that both sides are being shown or practiced within the kata—either that or an attempt to bring the kata back to the original starting point at the end, though this certainly does not generally seem to be of any importance in Okinawan koryu kata.)



**Figure 1-7** *The second palm-up technique from Seisan kata before pivoting to the west.*

The point here, however, is that the second of these techniques (and the fourth, if one chooses to repeat this technique four times) is done a bit differently. In the first of these techniques, the right hand is brought up palm-first and then rotated until the palm is facing forward. The second technique is usually done that way also, with the left palm rotated until it is facing forward. However, if you watch some of the older teachers perform Seisan kata, you will see that at least some of them do not rotate the left palm. Rather, the left palm is rotated forward only as it is brought in toward the chest, the movement that precedes the turn to the right (west) to finish the bunkai sequence. The reason it is performed this way in kata by some of the older teachers is that the left palm has been brought up into the opponent's chin (the right has hold of the hair or topknot), and as the left palm is brought in toward the chest, the opponent's head is twisted in (see "It Was a Gray Day," page 210). Then, with the pivot to the right or west, the opponent's head is twisted sharply in the opposite direction.



**Figure 1-8** How the second palm-up technique from Seisan kata is applied.

This, of course, raises a difficult issue. Kata should always inform bunkai. Otherwise we're left with all manner of creative interpretations that don't bear the least resemblance to kata movement. But kata was meant to preserve bunkai or self-defense applications. We have, I think, an innate desire to generalize movement, to homogenize it in order to understand it. But from a certain perspective, there really is no such thing as standard or basic technique, no generic chest blocks, for example, when it comes to the classical kata, if each scenario is unique. Certainly there is good technique and bad technique, but the performance of any given technique is really dependent on how it is used in a sequence of kata movements. Occasionally, I think, over time, some of these movements, for whatever reason, have undergone subtle changes—differences have been dropped, rough edges have been smoothed out, until what was once only similar is now seen as the same technique.

When I was a lot younger, I used to look at every tree, judging whether it was a good climbing tree or not. I know a lumberman who would look at trees and size up the quality of the wood—was it soft or hard, straight-grained or not? We could look at the techniques of kata in the same way, but perhaps they shouldn't be seen as subjects for fertile imaginations to interpret any way they see fit. Neither should we look at techniques as though they were generic or like the letters of an alphabet. How we do techniques in kata should really be dependent on how they fit into kata, how they are used within the self-defense scenarios of the different kata of the system. Like trees, I suspect, they're all different.



## Well, That's About the Size of It

“Well, that’s about the size of it,” he said. I realized I hadn’t been paying attention. I knew he was summing something up, but I didn’t remember what he had been talking about. I was thinking about the conservation area where we found ourselves. I had stopped on the trail to watch a pileated woodpecker, and he had been coming up from the other direction when he paused to see what had caught my attention.

The conservation area isn’t very big—about 625 acres, but with over a hundred different bird species and five miles of trails—yet it’s enough to get away from the sounds of traffic and the general insanity of the world for an hour or two, at least if you can get around the back edge of the hill, in under the shelter of the pines. After all, the entrance off this end is only two or three miles from the center of town.

As we separated—him on his way out toward the parking area and me turning up the trail to the right—I found myself thinking about the size of things. The Fitzgerald Lake area is only a fraction of the size of the new Katahdin Woods and Waters National Monument that President Obama designated the last year of his presidency, all 87,500 acres, and that’s supposedly only 1 percent of Maine’s woodlands. I can’t really even picture things that size. How long would it take you to walk that? Could you even begin to get a feel for the lay of the land?

But that got me to thinking about the martial arts and different systems of self-defense. I once knew a guy who said he had studied Kempo (that’s certainly rather generic but the only designation he gave it) for five years or so, and in that time, he said, he had learned three hundred thousand forms. Now, I’m thinking, there’s no way in hell this is true, so I asked him to elaborate. His first “form” consisted of a head block and punch. His second “form” consisted of a chest block and punch. And so on and so on. Still, three hundred thousand?

I visited a Shito Ryu dojo once where they told me that their curriculum included over fifty kata. That’s true—they do all of the Shorin-ryu kata and all of the Goju-ryu kata, and maybe a few others from various sources, as

Mabuni Kenwa sensei, the founder, had trained a number of different styles and chose to incorporate each of them into Shito-ryu. Mabuni sensei, of course, may have been proficient in each of these styles, no doubt. But the same could certainly not be said of anyone in the Shito-ryu school I visited. When one of the black belts was asked to demonstrate a particular kata (Seipai, in this case), he demurred, saying he hadn't practiced it for quite a while and worried that he couldn't remember it. I suspect he thought there were just too many kata. The system was just too big.

And on the other end of the spectrum, we have Uechi, with its three classical kata—Sanchin, Sanseiru, and Seisan.

So how big is Goju-ryu? There are eight classical kata—kata of ancient origin that show bunkai sequences and embody the principles of the system—and, of course, Sanchin and Tensho (and a number of other modern training kata developed by various teachers in the twentieth century). Each of the classical “bunkai” kata, for lack of a better term, explores a theme or themes of self-defense and illustrates them with anywhere from three to five application scenarios, each sequence beginning with an uke and progressing to a finishing technique. Some of the themes are more obvious than others—like the double-arm receiving technique of Sanseiru paired with a couple of different controlling or bridging techniques and two or three different finishing techniques. Or the five techniques against cross-hand grabs and pushes we see in Seiunchin, though one might also look at the downward forearm strike as one of the themes of the kata, since it is used as a finishing technique in a number of the sequences.

But really, how big is Goju-ryu if we are considering techniques, not just the number of kata? After all, there are a number of ways to look at this question. But outside of simply counting the number of kata, it's actually quite hard to say how big any particular style is. For example: Seipai is fairly straightforward, with five bunkai sequences, while Saifa has perhaps two, perhaps four, depending on how you look at it. Kururunfa also has four sequences. And Suparinpei, though it shows three complete bunkai sequences, is also made up of the repetition of finishing techniques that can all be attached to the series of entry and controlling *mawashi uke* and *nukite* techniques at the beginning of the kata. How do you count techniques that are not shown in complete sequences?

And then there's the question of structure. The sort of fragmented (or complex?) structure of some kata, like Shisochin or Sanseiru, makes them difficult to size up. Shisochin seems to show three or four release techniques against a clinch or two-handed grab, with one bridging technique and two different finishes, one short (fig. 1.9) and one significantly longer. But each of these sequences can be taken apart and put together in various ways. The structure itself seems to suggest variations. And really, it's all about variations. Seisan kata has only three bunkai sequences, but each is a variation of the same fundamental techniques—similar entry, bridging, and finishing techniques. How should one count that?



*Figure 1-9 One of the finishing techniques of Shisochin kata.*

The really interesting aspect of this idea of themes and variations, however, is that once you see them, you can not only change from one sequence to another within a given kata if you are applying them in two-person drills or bunkai practice, but also from one technique to another

between different kata, moving from a receiving technique in one kata to a completely different controlling or finishing technique from another kata. So in that sense, Goju-ryu is fairly small, composed of only eight bunkai kata with a combined total of around thirty or so bunkai sequences, but almost infinitely large if you consider how the different sequences can be broken down and recombined, dependent on the dynamics of a changing situation and the exigencies of a given self-defense scenario.

Too big? The fact that it is all based on themes and variations—as opposed to its being an encyclopedic collection of individual techniques—makes it at least manageable. Provided, that is, you can see the forest for the trees.

## Keeping the Elbows Down



Another wet day. The rocks were slick on the trails and there were puddles here and there where the rain collected in small depressions lined with leaves. It began to rain again just as I started up the trail. Everything was uniformly gray and misty, making the trees stand out like etched outlines on paper. Most of the trees seem young along here, stretching up like telephone poles, with few if any lower branches, but here and there you can still see an old gnarled pine or maybe a red maple with its limbs all twisted as if it's fending off beasts or would-be loggers. I'm on the lookout for these old codgers. I'm hoping to find one of those Native American trail marker trees, the kind that looks sort of like someone's arm held up and bent at the elbow, as if the tree itself were making a sharp right turn. Some say they don't exist in New England—the tree has to be two or three hundred years old—but others have already identified a few.



**Figure 1-10** We learn to keep the elbows down in Sanchin posture and then apply it in postures like this from Shisochin kata.

It's a curious thought. The process, they say, may take years. You find a likely sapling and then bend it over with a cord or rope, pointing in the direction of a water source or a natural stream crossing. Then, years later, after the tree has grown to accommodate this bent shape, you come back and release it from its shackles and allow it to straighten up. Only it doesn't straighten completely; it leaves a crook like an elbow in its trunk.

Of course, that's the connection: the elbow. There's a passage in the Chinese classics that runs, "All the joints of the arms should be completely relaxed, with the shoulders sunk and elbows folded down."<sup>2</sup> We practice this in Goju-ryu, of course, with the arms held in Sanchin posture, but it's such an important concept in the martial arts that it should not just be looked at as a position one takes up in the execution of a particular kata; rather, it's a principle that one needs to absorb. Perhaps we should tie the limbs down to train this posture, to grow into it, as the Native Americans

tied down the trunks of young saplings to create their trail markers. There are some who have creatively thought of hanging weights from the elbows while the student is doing Sanchin kata.

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<sup>2</sup> Yang Ch'eng-fu, quoted in Douglas Wile, trans., *T'ai-Chi Touchstones: Yang Family Secret Transmissions* (New York: Sweet Ch'i Press, 1983).

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Another method, and perhaps a bit easier to accommodate, especially if one is training by oneself, is to simply walk carrying a large log. When I first began training Goju-ryu, we had a thirty- to forty-pound log about three and a half feet long and eight inches in diameter that we would cradle in the crook of both arms and walk, in Sanchin posture, across the dojo floor. After ten or twelve steps, we would toss the log in the air by straightening the arms with a sort of punching motion. Then we tossed the log to the next person, who would walk back across the floor. Of course, this exercise is intended to develop a number of things, but certainly one of the most useful benefits is to train to keep the elbows down. The question is whether any exercise can develop a principle of movement until it becomes second nature.

The other question for me, however, is whether we can fully appreciate these principles without understanding the bunkai—that is, you can do it in order to assume the correct appearance and form in kata, but can you really “grow into” this technique? Can you really absorb the principle if you don’t see the necessity of moving this way by having to use it against another person? The bunkai you have “discovered” has to necessitate the use of this principle.

For example: Take the first movement in Seiunchin kata—stepping out on a northeast angle into a right-foot-forward Horse Stance (*shiko dachi*) with both hands brought up back-to-back and with the elbows down (fig. 1.11). If this technique is executed against a two-handed choke hold, as many interpret it, you won’t see the necessity of keeping the elbows down. But if you try this against a cross-hand grab—the attacker grabbing your left wrist with his left hand—then the necessity of keeping the elbow down should become apparent, and the principle will thereby be reinforced. (See “The Hemlocks Are Dying,” page 229, for the application.)



*Figure 1-11 First movement in Seiunchin kata.*

Or we might look at the first movement of the second sequence in Seiunchin kata, the “assisted block.” In this move, the defender is doing what looks like a closed-fist middle-level block with the right arm, and the left hand seems to be assisting by pushing on the side of the right wrist or fist (fig. 1.12). If this is really being used as an assisting block against a strong opponent, as the conventional interpretation suggests, then there seems to be little reason to keep the right elbow down. However, if once again the attacker is using a cross-hand grab—the opponent grabbing your right wrist with his right hand—then the necessity of keeping the elbow down is apparent. You drop the elbow, and rotate the hand, and bring the left hand in to trap the opponent’s fingers so that he can’t let go (fig. 1.13). Then you push out toward his center as you step forward to the northeast corner. All of this works against his wrist, and if you understand the principle of keeping the elbow down, then you’re not trying to out-muscle the opponent.





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**Figure 1-12** First movement of second sequence in Seiunchin kata.

And if we practice this enough, we may even begin to learn the principle, to incorporate the idea into all of our movements. That, in a metaphorical sense, is how we “grow into” the technique, in the same way that a Native American trail marker tree had to grow into these fantastic shapes, marking the paths and pointing in the right direction. I suppose they could have just put up signs, but it wouldn’t have been quite the same, I think.



**Figure 1-13** *Trapping the opponent's hand and working against the wrist in order to bring the head down to continue the attack.*

# Where Have You Been, My Blue-Eyed Son

There's crap along the trail. Someone left a half-eaten sandwich, still in its sandwich baggie, tucked in behind a log. I'm sure that will frustrate the squirrels to no end, though I guess it depends on whether or not you can smell a peanut butter and jelly sandwich through a sealed plastic bag. Who knows? It could be there for years.

It was a beautiful warm summer weekend, so I suppose it's to be expected, but I still don't understand it. Why dump garbage in a place that's so beautiful? What happened to those old admonitions: Cart it in, carry it out? Or, leave no trace? I suppose it could have just fallen out of someone's backpack, unintentionally left behind. Or some ten-year-old didn't like whatever it was they had packed for lunch and tried to hide the evidence. There was an empty soda can a little farther up the trail, along with a couple of cigarette butts and a gum wrapper—highly suspicious and much less likely to suggest an innocent explanation. And there are no street sweepers or custodians out here in the woods, only kindly volunteer caretakers of the forests and streams who cart away other people's trash. I put the gum wrapper and the cigarette butts in my coat pocket.

Of course, some would say, it's not nearly as bad as what you find on a short walk around the city. Adding to the litter everywhere, everything from buildings to bridges to mailboxes and trucks gets tagged with cryptic symbols in spray paint, as ubiquitous as a dog marking its territory. But it really annoys me in the woods. And for some reason, it made me think of something Matayoshi sensei commented on one day in the dojo after I had done a kata. I had stepped back to execute a block, but I was trying to be particularly forceful and demonstrate strong technique—I was young—so I stomped the floor loudly. And I did it again on the other side of the kata, so there could be no mistaking my intention, though in retrospect I'm not at all sure what my intention was. After I finished, Matayoshi sensei told me that one should never be “loud” when executing a block. He said being loud was okay for an attack, but not for a block or when you were retreating. Your opponent would know where you were, he said. Hum ...

I suppose when you think about it, it certainly has wider implications in the martial arts. The more force I put into my receiving technique or “block,” the more my opponent can read my intentions. Better to be light. Better that my opponent can’t tell where I am or how much force I’m using or what my next move is going to be ... until I attack. To me this is one of the ways we can understand “*go* and *ju*,” hard and soft. The receiving techniques (what are generally understood as “blocks,” for lack of a better term) are, most often, soft and relaxed, usually accompanied by off-line or angular movement that doesn’t, after all, necessitate a lot of strength. Of course, the attacks are relaxed as well, if you understand the whole idea of using *koshi*. But immediately after the attack, again the idea is to disappear, to relax in order to be able to move in response to whatever the opponent does next, sort of like the fast “punches” at the beginning of Seisan kata—they immediately return to a relaxed, double-arm Sanchin posture (fig. 1.14).



**Figure 1-14** Returning to the double-arm kamae after the “punch” in Seisan kata.

Or like the beginning of the fourth sequence in Seipai kata, where you are advancing to the southeast corner of the kata with a left block and a right open-hand attack in *renoji dachi* (fig. 1.15). The circular forearm block (executed in a clockwise direction in the first of these techniques) intercepts the attacker's right punch (or grab) and merely moves around it, from the outside to the inside, ending in a down position. That's why so many see it as a block of a kick, because it ends in the down position. I recently came across a video of a teacher I have the utmost respect for demonstrating this technique against a front kick—blocking and hooking the kick and then grabbing the opponent, sweeping his supporting leg, and dropping him on the ground.



*Figure 1-15 Beginning of the fourth sequence in Seipai kata.*

It's strange to me that most schools see this technique as a block and grab of an opponent's kick. The kick would have to be at least at the level of the waist. Yet there's an old saying in Okinawan karate that we never kick above the waist. In fact, the knees are a much better target and are harder to

defend. Then there's the principle—seemingly borne out in kata—that we don't kick without having three feet on the ground, one of ours and two of the opponent's, meaning we are holding onto the opponent rather than initiating with a kick. And yet the interpretation of this technique as a block and hooking grab of a kick would seem to require the opponent to initiate an attack with a fairly high kick. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, not to mention that it's really hard to grab someone's kick in a realistic situation.

But if you're intercepting the opponent's punch on the outside and moving to the inside with the circular motion of the "blocking" arm, it's really effortless. Then, without pausing, you step in with the right foot along the outside of the opponent's right leg (in the first of these Seipai techniques, the one to the southeast corner), carrying the head with the right hand (fig. 1.17), and do a sort of judo-like hip throw. And, done this way, it all requires very little physical strength, very little for your opponent to "read."



**Figure 1-16** *Receiving the opponent's attack in the fourth sequence of Seipai.*



**Figure 1-17** *The continuation of the fourth sequence in Seipai with the defender stepping around the attacker in order to execute a hip throw.*

So many of the receiving techniques of Goju-ryu are like this; they don't leave a trace for the opponent to sense where you've been or where you might be going ... unlike some of the trails through the woods these days.

## Off with Their Heads!

The forest was gray today. The sky was overcast. Off in the distance, if you weren't looking directly at them, you could sense the movements of small birds hopping from branch to branch, but when you looked, the woods returned to stillness. Even the chipmunks sat motionless in their hollow logs as if they were on their best behavior under the reproachful eye of the woodland librarian, afraid that the slightest stir of rustling leaves would disturb their neighbors. It's strange how powerful this sense of stillness is; you have to pause for a moment in the midst of it, taking it all in. It's as if you've walked into a room full of people and suddenly the conversation and laughter dies. Instead of walking off in the woods, invisible, immersed in the cacophony of nature, just another insignificant bipedal organism, you're caught—an intruder, the only thing moving in this diorama. It's difficult to recover from this, this sense of otherness, this feeling of being an outsider.

I don't think I ever felt this way as a child, running through the woods. We would walk up mountain streams, balancing on rocks, stopping occasionally to look for crayfish or salamanders. I spent a great deal of time running through the woods when I was a child. The Appalachian Trail ran along the ridge of the mountain where we lived. I don't remember ever seeing any "No Trespassing" signs back then, though I doubt if we would have paid attention to them anyway. We didn't know there were copperheads in those woods either, though we would often collect sloughed off snake skins to take home, trophies that would sit proudly on bookcases and bureaus beside the rare skull of a squirrel or fox, nothing left of the animal but this bit of whitened bone with its teeth still intact, as if it had no defense against a predator powerful enough to sever its head from the rest of its body.

I don't think it ever occurred to me as a child, but it's gruesome to contemplate now. And yet the techniques we find in traditional martial arts are as violent as what we might witness in the natural world between predator and prey. Most of the classical kata of Goju-ryu are filled with neck-breaking techniques.



Sometimes it strikes me as odd how much time people spend practicing punching in Goju-ryu. Standing in front of the *makiwara* (striking post) and pounding out a hundred punches with each hand seems hardly unusual in many traditional circles, where a significant amount of class time is spent on *hojo undo* (supplementary exercises) training. Having swollen or calloused knuckles seems to be a badge of honor or a sign of one's prowess, as much as a frayed and worn black belt.

I suppose most dojos spend so much time punching—seemingly endless repetitions of jodan tsuki and head blocks, followed by chudan tsuki and chest blocks, followed by gedan tsuki and down blocks—simply because we need to train things that all levels can train together. This is not to suggest that learning how to punch correctly is not important. Of course it is. But when you look at the totality of techniques in the Goju-ryu classical kata, punches seem to make up a rather small percentage.

Then why is there such an emphasis on punching—not just in doing group basics together but also in doing *ippon kumite* (one point fighting) and *yakusoku kumite* (prearranged sparring) and in a good deal of the bunkai that one sees being done in most schools? Perhaps it satisfies some urge we have to punch things. Or perhaps it simply fits our expectations of a karate school—indeed, martial arts in general. Or perhaps punching seemed less violent—as ironic as that may sound—when early pioneers tried to popularize karate with the general public. I must admit that I've often thought that many of the “real” techniques in the Goju-ryu classical kata have seemed to me at times too violent or dangerous to actually practice with a partner. For example, the first technique from the opening sequence of Seipai (fig. 1.18) is difficult to actually practice as a neck break, so it is taught, and in fact the way most people understand it, as an attack to the opponent's ribs with the elbow. But that's really a poor substitute.



*Figure 1-18 One of the neck-breaking techniques of Seipai kata.*

Or the end of the second sequence from the middle of Kururunfa—another twist-your-head-off technique (figs. 1.19–20). It looks like the finishing mawashi from Saifa. They both end in Cat Stance, one open hand facing up and one facing down, as they rotate, twisting the opponent's head and attacking with the knee (fig. 1.21). The techniques from these two kata look very similar because they are both doing the same thing.

Or the last technique in Sanseiru (fig. 1.22). Though this technique is also a neck break, most schools practice it using one hand as a hooking block or grab while the other hand attacks the opponent's neck with the bent wrist of the front hand.



**Figure 1-19** *The starting position of the mawashi-like technique that occurs in the middle of Kururunfa kata.*



**Figure 1-20** *The final position of the mawashi-like technique at the end of Saifa or Seisan kata or the middle of Kururunfa kata.*



**Figure 1-21** *Mawashi-like neck break from Kururunfa kata.*



**Figure 1-22** In the last technique in Sanseiru kata—the Shodokan version that turns counterclockwise—the left hand grabs the opponent’s chin and pulls up as the right hand grabs the head and pushes down. The lead-in to this technique is the double “punch.” (See “A Block Is Not Always a Block,” page 41, for the application of the double “punch.”)

Or the “arm break,” which isn’t really an arm break in Seipai (fig. 1.23).

You can find these techniques in most of the Goju-ryu kata. And if not techniques that are intended to twist the head off, at least techniques to attack the head or neck. So what’s with all the chest punches and all the work devoted to hitting the makiwara? Perhaps we should be working the *nigiri-game* (gripping jars) far more, or twisting bundles of bamboo to develop the grip strength to twist someone’s head off. After all, it’s often said that Miyagi Chojun sensei could tear the hide of a dead pig with his bare hands. And, of course, we should be doing all sorts of exercises to build up strength in our own neck muscles so we might be able to actually train some of these. Or is that all just too violent to consider?



**Figure 1-23** *This technique from Seipai is also used to attack the head and neck.*

## A Block Is Not Always a Block

I was sitting on a rock in the woods the other day, taking a few minutes to lament the relentless march of time and the inescapable encroachment of modern life—they're logging not a stone's throw from the entrance trail of the conservation area where I often go for walks, and I'm feeling like the proverbial curmudgeon complaining about it—thinking what a nice seat I had found there, positioned as it was under the trees. I could replace the old Adirondack chairs with a few of these, I thought. They'd certainly last longer and weather the New England winters a bit better. I was reminded of a boulder on the way to Lake Oscawana, where my family used to vacation in the summers when I was a kid—my grandfather had built a cottage there, and my father used to go sailing there when he was young. On the way to the lake, on these winding dirt roads that meandered through the woods, there was a large boulder with a naturally worn indentation in it that my mother always wanted to take home and use as a bird bath. It was about five feet high and must have weighed several tons!

Of course, that boulder is probably still sitting by the side of the road, where it was dropped some time during the last ice age, I imagine. And the rock I was sitting on would never really replace a good Adirondack chair. There were no benches in this part of the woods—not that I'm a fan of putting up benches in the wilderness, at least what passes for scenic wilderness this close to the city—so there was no picturesque place to sit and bathe in the natural beauties of the world but any sort of large rock would serve in a pinch. However, it was still a rock, and only relatively comfortable given that there wasn't any alternative.

And for some reason, thinking about that rock made me think about the old dojo admonition: "A block is not always a block, and a punch is not always a punch." Or, as it is sometimes understood: "A punch is a block and a block is a punch." At least that's how some students of karate have chosen to interpret it, I gathered from an essay I read a few days earlier. And I thought, which is it? The two are vastly different if you stop to consider it.



I tried to think of an appropriate analogy. Analogies always help me to understand things a little bit better. For instance, a pie plate could be used as a Frisbee. I think they started out that way, actually. But a pie plate *isn't* a very good Frisbee, and a Frisbee would certainly not make a very acceptable pie plate.



**Figure 1-24** The beginning of the last technique in Saifa kata—what is sometimes referred to as the right ridge-hand attack.

I think it's the same in karate. Take the ridge-hand strike (*haito uchi*), for example, done with the opposite side of the hand as the *shuto* attack, with the point of contact on the side of the index finger knuckle of the hand when the hand is brought across, palm down. Some people find this strike beginning the last mawashi technique of Saifa kata (fig. 1.24). But it's a lousy way to attack anything. *Could* it be used as a strike? Certainly it *could*, but was that its original intention, given that it's not a very effective strike, and probably more likely to injure the person using it than the person it is used on?

I think what they really mean when they say that “a block is not always a block” is that things aren’t always what they seem. Take the down block (*gedan barai*, sometimes called *gedan uke*), for example. Some have even referred to it as a *kamae* posture in both *Seiunchin* and *Seipai* kata since it is sometimes executed stepping back. Their assumption is that a step backward itself implies a kind of *en garde* posture or a block. But it just *looks* like a down block. In the classical subjects of *Goju-ryu*, it isn’t used as a block at all. You could call it a block. You could even use it as a block in some *yakusoku kumite* drill, as many do. But if we base our interpretation of the technique on how it is used in the sequences of the classical *Goju-ryu* kata, then it isn’t a block. Of course, it isn’t a punch either. In the classical subjects, it’s used as an attack with the forearm against the head or neck of the opponent. (See the image in “*Seiunchin* Once Again,” fig. 1.34.)

On the other side of the equation, while I would certainly agree that a punch is not always a punch, sometimes it’s not a block either. Look at the double punch (or more properly, what *looks* like a double punch) that we find in *Sanseiru* and *Suparinpei*. From its position in the sequences of both kata, it would seem to be neither a punch nor a block (fig. 1.25).

The saying is meant to be useful when it comes to understanding kata, useful in analyzing the techniques of kata. When we say that a block is not always a block, we are opening up all sorts of possibilities. That is, we look at a technique in kata that looks like a block and, rather than immediately falling prey to that assumption, we try to imagine what else it might be, how else it might be used. Or we look at a technique in kata that looks like a punch and try to imagine what else might be going on in the kata. What came before it? Did the hands open and then close, suggesting that one may be grabbing instead of punching, as in the double “punch” technique of *Sanseiru*? When we simplify all of this and merely assume that a punch is either (a) a punch or (b) a block, or that a block is either (a) a block or (b) a punch, we are in fact oversimplifying karate. It becomes nothing more than a schoolboy martial art, nothing more than block, punch, and kick techniques.



**Figure 1-25** *The double “punch” functions the same way in both Sanseiru and Suparinpei kata—as a head twist or neck break.*

We tend to love cryptic sayings; they seem to hint at unplumbed depths of hidden meaning. I can just hear old Master Po whispering softly into Kwai Chang Caine’s ear: “A block is not always a block, Grasshopper.” And all he meant to suggest is that it may look like a block in kata, but appearances can be deceiving.

But to say that a punch *is* a block and a block *is* a punch ... well, it would be sort of like calling that rock there a tree. It’s clearly not.

## Weeding the Garden

The rains finally let up this week, at least for a day, so I decided to forgo a walk in the woods and tackle the garden, a small patch of nature in the backyard. It was long overdue. It doesn't take much to distract me. The thought of grubbing around in the dirt, pulling weeds, and swatting flies away never seemed that attractive to me anyway. Even the distant thought of a lettuce and tomato sandwich supplied by our own garden isn't a sufficient draw. The mosquitoes alone are enough to keep me at bay most of the time, and the rain usually brings them in hordes, but with the sun out they keep mostly in the shade. Of course I had slathered on quite a bit of deet, so that may have been the reason they left me in relative peace. But what struck me, as I was pulling out Creeping Charlie and blades of grass and all manner of unidentifiable weeds from around the oregano and rosemary and catnip, is that it always seems as though the weeds take over. Is that just the natural order of things? I read someplace that when humans are gone from the earth it will be the cockroaches that take over. Of course, in the martial arts it may be different, but then again, who's to say? Do we have to do some weeding here as well?

I've had a lot of conversations with people—some not so friendly—who steadfastly and adamantly argued that kata can mean whatever you want it to mean; that is, any bunkai or interpretation of kata movement that works is good—though one should remember that what seems to work in the dojo may not work so well in a real confrontation. But the supposition here—what this sort of anything-goes approach to kata and bunkai is based on—is the idea that kata were created with this sort of intentional ambiguity. In books and online, you will find all sorts of different explanations for the same moves in kata. Is everyone right? Or, by the law of averages, are most of them wrong?



**Figure 1-26** *The opening posture of this Kingai-ryu kata is beautiful, but why is kata so often taught without any explanation of how the movements are meant to be applied—without bunkai?*

Of course, the idea of intentional ambiguity is a bit far-fetched. Simple logic tells us that self-defense applications came first and kata was just a means to remember them and to practice them in the absence of a partner or teacher. The larger question is, of course, how do we know which applications are the “right” ones?

Some would say you can’t know, since that would be trying to figure out what the original creators of the different kata had in mind. But does that close off all of history to the historian, or do they push doggedly on? We unearth artifacts to learn about past civilizations. We apply the scientific method to problems in the universe. We analyze evidence to solve crimes. Why can’t we apply logic and a knowledge of martial principles to the analysis of kata? Without it, it seems to me, we are doing a disservice to the garden, letting the weeds proliferate. Without it, the cockroaches will soon take over, and where will we be then? The whole debate is apt to get me

into hot water. Generally, when I sense that it's about to be brought up again, I head back out to the woods.

# When a Tree Falls in the Forest and Other Thoughts on Bunkai

If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one there to hear it ... does it really matter? It will lead to all sorts of unexpected outcomes. The tree will fall. There will be an opening in the canopy overhead. Sunlight will reach the forest floor where it hadn't before, where it had been shady for years. A small seedling will begin to sprout or an acorn lying dormant under a blanket of leaves will feel the sun. The next thing you know, there will be little twig-size slips of oak or maple or aspen, two oversized leaves on a slender stick the size of a toothpick. Of course, the grass takes over first, it seems, followed by the weeds and the ground creepers, but the trees are there—a balsam fir or a white pine or a spruce. They each send up these little central shoots with a more or less symmetrical arrangement of branches. It begins with a cluster of buds at the tip of the shoot. The central bud becomes the trunk of the new tree, and the buds that surround it grow laterally into branches. And each year's growth follows the same pattern, unless the deer come and nibble off the buds or the central bud gets damaged somehow. If it does, the tree is programmed in such a way that one of the lateral buds that had been destined to become a branch takes over the role of the central bud and becomes the trunk.

I've been reading a lot of Bernd Heinrich lately. He writes about birds and trees and running, among other things. I hope I'm not oversimplifying what he says about trees too much, but it's this changing aspect of the new tree that got me thinking about its relationship to the martial arts as I was out in the woods the other day. We approach the study of kata as if it's something sacrosanct, a ritualized performance piece. And yet we look at bunkai as if the movements are so fluid and dynamic that they supposedly have countless ways of interpreting or applying them. This point of view is, in fact, so widespread that it almost seems as though it has fostered the growth of a whole new industry based on seminars and the discovery of new and ever-more-outlandish applications. But this collection process, accumulating more and more possible applications for the same moves in

kata, really works against our ability to use the system for the purpose for which it was designed; it makes it too complicated.

What we need to do is uncomplicate things. We could start with a simple statement about the structure of a kata. Kata are composed of different kinds of techniques—receiving techniques, bridging techniques, and finishing techniques. The problem is that even a statement as straightforward as this is not really taken to be a general rule. The problem is exacerbated by that rather cryptic but misunderstood statement that “a block is not always a block, and a punch is not always a punch.”

Many practitioners, blessed with more inventiveness than logic, imagine every technique as a potentially lethal strike of one kind or another, from the assisted “punch” at the end of the first sequence of Seiunchin (fig. 1.27) to the double open-hand technique of Sanseiru (fig. 1.28). Yet both of these are controlling or bridging techniques. The lethal finishing technique in the first example is the rising elbow technique followed by the final *yama uke* at the end of the kata. The lethal finishing technique in the second example is the head-twisting technique we see in the last posture of Sanseiru.

The confusion may also be fueled by the fanciful notion of the one-punch kill—certainly mythical—and how this fosters the idea that every technique can be deadly, because if every technique is deadly, then they are all the same as far as intent. But of course they’re not. And that’s why some rudimentary understanding of structure and the sequences of kata is important. The question for me, however, is what do we do with it once we get to a point where we can readily see the structure and sequences of kata? And what does it have to do with the arrangement of shoots on a pine seedling in the forest?





**Figure 1-27** The assisted “punch” in the first sequence of Seiunchin kata is really the controlling technique, with the left hand on the attacker’s chin and the right hand grabbing the top of the head or hair.



**Figure 1-28** *The double open-hand technique from Sanseiru kata occurs after the application of the double-arm core technique to grab the opponent's head, with the left hand on the attacker's chin and the right hand on the head.*

Each entry technique is part of a sequence, but because of the exigencies of any given situation—how the attacker responds to the initial block or receiving technique, one's balance, the strength of the opponent, and so on—you may need to change things up at some point, sort of like the new shoot when a deer comes along and nibbles off the central bud.

For example, if you respond to an attack with the receiving technique from the first sequence of Kururunfa (fig. 1.29), something unforeseen could happen that causes you to change the sequence and instead continue with the finishing technique from the second sequence of Seipai kata (fig. 1.30). That is, from the initial technique of Kururunfa, you might simply hold onto the attacker's head and drop back into shiko dachi, as in Seipai.

Alternatively, if one were starting from the initial technique in Kururunfa kata—which, I would suggest, is probably initiated from a clinch or

grapple-like confrontation—the defender might bring the left hand up to the attacker’s chin and simply twist the neck, as we see in the first *bunkai* sequence from Seisan kata (see “It Was a Gray Day,” page 50) or in either of two sequences from Suparinpei kata (figs. 1.31–32).



**Figure 1-29** *The initial technique of Kururunfa.*



**Figure 1-30** Part of the finishing technique from the second sequence of Seipai kata, followed by what looks like a downward elbow strike.



**Figure 1-31** An attack to the neck from the opening mawashi series in Suparinpei, where the right hand grabs the head and the left hand is brought up to attack the neck and control the chin.



**Figure 1-32** In this position from the first complete sequence of Suparinpei kata, the right arm has been brought behind the opponent's head after an elbow attack. With the right hand controlling the opponent's head, the left open hand is brought out to the attacker's chin in order to twist the neck.

If the defender's momentum is moving forward or the attacker is pulling away, the defender might close the hands, with the left hand holding the opponent's chin and the right hand holding the head or hair, and step forward, twisting the head as we see in the double "punch" technique from Sanseiru (fig. 1.33) and, of course, continue with the rest of that sequence.

Kata itself is a repository of technique, and each technique in a given sequence functions differently. But there are obvious similarities between techniques in different kata, so much so that it is often easy to move from the techniques of one kata into the techniques of another. Alternatively, we can also move from the techniques of one sequence to the techniques of another sequence in the same kata if we understand the themes the kata is exploring. Once we understand this, we can take them apart and put them together in different ways, all depending on what happens in any given

situation. In that sense, the system of self-defense we know as Goju-ryu becomes both smaller and larger at the same time. It is smaller because it becomes more manageable—there are, for instance, a finite number of receiving techniques, and the same might be said of the bridging and finishing techniques as well. In other words, one doesn't need to become a master of what at one time must have seemed like an encyclopedic number of techniques. But it is also larger, because if we truly understand the system and its kata, then we can see an almost infinite number of ways that the individual techniques can be taken apart and put back together.

So what if a tree falls in the forest? Stuff happens. Another tree will come along and take its place.



**Figure 1-33** Double “punching” technique from Sanseiru.

## Seiunchin Once Again

Off in the woods the other day, admiring the mushrooms and toadstools that seemed to have sprung up overnight, and generally marveling at the magical quality of the woods after a rainstorm, I found myself thinking about a news story I had heard on the radio a few days earlier. The story summarized an article published in *Nature* about the supernova known as iPTF14hls. It's five hundred million light-years away—astounding to me the sheer scale that some people seem to be comfortable thinking about and working with, but that's not what the astronomers found so interesting. What was unusual, apparently, was that they expected it to act like any other supernova and gradually dim until it would fade from view—something that takes around one hundred days for your average supernova. This one has exploded multiple times since 1954, and this current “explosion,” if I understand it correctly, has lasted three years. What I thought was interesting, however, was that the scientists said that it defied their understanding of how stars die—that current theories couldn't fully explain what was happening. In other words, they'd have to go back to the drawing board. And that's why they sounded so excited.

I wonder how many people get that excited when they get it wrong? And why? Does it take a certain thirst for discovery or is it a simpler pleasure, a sort of pleasure in the realization that one doesn't have all the answers, that there are new frontiers, new things to learn? Or perhaps it's the moment we realize that the structure or the rules or what have you are more complex and intriguing than we first imagined.

I was thinking about all of this while I was practicing Seiunchin. I like the movements of Seiunchin, but I thought that at least this kata was one that I felt fairly secure about, that I knew the bunkai. There are, after all, only five sequences in the kata (not counting repetitions). And it's fairly clear, I think, that the counters (or receiving techniques, if you will) are all against either cross-hand grabs or two-handed pushes.

Anyway, I realized that I may have failed to notice, after all these years, something about the structure of the kata. If you understand the structure of



a kata, it can explain a lot about the techniques themselves. The problem is that at least in some cases there may be a fair amount of guesswork, though just as in any scientific inquiry, there are some things that indicate at the very least whether you're on the right track or not.



*Figure 1-34* Gedan finishing technique for the four angle sequences. The first gedan technique in shiko dachi of each of the four corner sequences is used to bring the opponent's head down, while the second gedan technique is used to attack the neck.

What I noticed was that the sequences on the angles—since this part of the kata is constructed in an X pattern, the angle sequences moving to the northeast, the northwest, the southwest, and the southeast, in that order, in the Goju-ryu version of Seiunchin—all end with a downward forearm strike to the opponent's neck (fig. 1.34). (This is the technique that is sometimes referred to as a gedan barai or gedan uke.) There are four of these angles, but only two different sequences since each is repeated on both the right and left sides. What is of interest here is that the downward forearm strike to the neck is a finishing technique, just as it is in Seipai kata.

The other three sequences of the kata all occur on the north-south axis. The first of these, of course, is the opening sequence, which is partially repeated three times, with the “finishing” technique tacked onto the third repetition—the left hand wrapped around the opponent’s chin, and the vertical right elbow attack coming up into the back of the opponent’s neck.



*Figure 1-35 The beginning of the second of the north-south sequences.*

The second of the north-south sequences is the high-low technique done in shiko dachi (fig. 1.35) and shown on both the right and left sides. The second of these, with the right arm up and the left arm down, shows a right hand grab of the opponent’s right arm and a left, low *shuto* attack, using the edge of the hand, to the opponent’s ribs. This technique seems to finish with a right forearm attack and downward elbow (fig. 1.36), since another sequence begins immediately after this (but one should emphasize “seems”).



**Figure 1-36** *The technique that ends the second north-south sequence but seems less than satisfying as a finish technique.*

The third and last of these north-south sequences is often described as two elbow attacks or wrist releases. (I’ve tried to explain this misunderstanding in my 2018 book *The Kata and Bunkai of Goju-Ryu*.) The finishing technique for this sequence is the knee attack to the head, the last technique of the kata, often described as a yama uke in Cat Stance.

But structure is everything. The structure or pattern of a kata is often the key to understanding the techniques—in this case, the sequences of the kata. I had always felt that the “finishing” techniques in the first two north-south sequences, while good, seemed less conclusive, less lethal, than many of the finishing techniques in the other classical kata or even in the third of these sequences, and this was what I was thinking a few weeks ago while I practiced Seiunchin. And then I realized that the two patterns of the kata—the X pattern of the angle sequences and the north-south line of the other three sequences—might show two different finishing techniques, but *only*

two. The first one is the use of the downward forearm strike. The second is the knee kick to the head in Cat Stance. The supposition is that the yama uke (fig. 1.38) and knee kick in Cat Stance—the last technique of the kata—is the finishing technique for *all three* of the north-south sequences, only it's just shown once, tacked onto the third sequence. This structure—of showing the finishing technique tacked onto the final repetition—is typical of the classical kata. It also makes the end of each sequence more lethal, finishing the sequence with a more decisive blow, if you will. And it fits. That is, it's easy to move into this final technique from the end of either of the first two north-south sequences.



*Figure 1-37 The beginning of the third of the north-south sequences.*

I found this realization, though admittedly only an educated guess on my part, to be exciting, even if I had been wrong in how I had been thinking about Seiunchin all these years. Live and learn. I still don't know, however, whether it was the discovery that I found interesting or the realization that the structure of the kata was more complex than I originally thought, that

whoever created this kata had been so clever at hiding something and yet keeping it right out there in plain view at the same time. It was all so fascinating. And, of course, it also reminds me that there is always so much more to learn.



*Figure 1-38. The technique that may, in fact, be the finish technique for each of the north-south sequences.*

## Footfalls in the Forest and Suparinpei

I was off in the woods last week, swatting at blackflies and being careful to avoid the poison ivy and the long blades of grass that reached out over the trail, giving deer ticks an ideal jumping-off place from which to latch onto unwary travelers. It was hot—95 degrees Fahrenheit (35 degrees Celsius)—but the heat index had it at 103 degrees. Even the birds seemed to be silenced by the heat. Most of the time, all I could hear was the quiet plodding of my own feet as I walked along a trail covered in the remains of last fall's leaves. This was certainly not the “road less traveled.” I was following in the footsteps of countless numbers of other hikers who had passed this way. Sometimes I could see the evidence: an upturned rock or the imprint of a boot heel that had sunk unexpectedly in the mud. The trail was wide enough that I could probably have followed it at night, which reminded me of that quote attributed to Miyagi sensei that appears in *Memories of My Sensei, Chojun Miyagi*. Miyagi tells Nakaima that “studying karate nowadays is like walking in the dark without a lantern.” Of course, nowadays we have battery-powered headlamps, though I doubt if it makes much difference in our understanding of karate.

The metaphor seems appropriate in a way. We would be hard-pressed to lose sight of the path—so many karate-ka have walked this way before. What gives me pause, however, are the contradictions in the metaphor: generations of karate-ka practicing diligently, trudging along this well-worn path in the dark.

I was watching a video the other day that had to do with the bunkai to the last technique in Suparinpei, the last kata of Goju-ryu and, at least in some symbolic way, the ultimate technique of the system, if not the most enigmatic, though again, that may be a bit fanciful on my part.

The problem was that the application seemed so complicated, not to mention the fact that it didn't take into account the two entry techniques, the circular arm blocks that we see at the beginning of the sequence. The starting position, in fact, had the opponent attacking from the rear, grabbing the defender by the shoulders with both hands. At this point, the defender

rotated and lunged forward, flicked his hand at the attacker's groin, head butted him, and then slid his head between the attacker's arms. He then trapped the attacker's arm and attacked his throat with a nukite (spear-hand attack). And it went on until the defender applied a submission hold—the interpretation of the last posture of the kata—grabbing the attacker's *gi* and applying pressure to his neck.

This, of course, is only one example of a multitude of creative interpretations of kata. Where karate schools used to compete in point sparring tournaments to engage the interest of casual practitioners, today teachers and students alike seem to be devoting more and more time and energy to the study of kata and bunkai. And that's certainly commendable and a better use of one's time, it seems to me.

The problem, I think, is that so much of the bunkai that is proffered is not based on sound martial principles. It seems to work in the dojo with a compliant partner, and it's wonderfully imaginative, but it also doesn't look much like kata.

When I watched the above example, I wondered if the time it took to execute all of these moves was realistic. Why would the attacker continue to hold onto what became an increasingly untenable position? Didn't this explanation require the attacker, an unpredictable component of the equation, to conform too readily to the defender's expectations? Some of the defender's movements didn't seem to accurately reflect kata movement. Isn't bunkai supposed to be an analysis of what we see in kata? Of course, I suppose some would argue that this was just one possible explanation for these techniques in Suparinpei, but if that's so, is that simply a confirmation that we are indeed still stumbling along the road "in the dark without a lantern?"

Or is it more likely that the bunkai to this last sequence in Suparinpei kata is far simpler and a good deal more effective? The sequence begins with what appears to be the same two-handed turn to the south that we see in Seisan kata—and indeed, there are many similarities between Suparinpei and Seisan, and also Sanseiru (see "Trails and Suparinpei," page 91, for a further discussion of this). In this case, however, there is a difference, evidenced by the second circular block as the defender shifts forward in shiko dachi.

Imagining that this sequence begins from a clinch position—the initial indication of this is the double-arm kamae posture at the beginning of the kata—the defender’s right arm comes over the attacker’s left arm from the outside, pushing down, as the defender’s left arm is brought up inside the attacker’s right arm, pushing up and out (fig. 1.39).

Then, grabbing and pulling the attacker’s right arm to unbalance him, the defender attacks to the face with the right open palm (fig. 1.40). This is the beginning of the second circular blocking motion.



**Figure 1-39** *The entry technique for the last sequence of Suparinpei begins from a clinch, though it works equally well against an opponent punching first with the left and then with the right. The defender’s right arm is brought over the attacker’s left arm from the outside, as the left arm is brought up inside the attacker’s right arm.*





*Figure 1-40 The left hand pulls the opponent in while the right palm strikes to the face.*

Shifting forward into shiko dachi, the defender then brings his left arm around, under the right arm, coming into contact with the attacker on the left side of his neck (fig. 1.41). This is the finish of the second circular block, a technique that may remind some of the “sun and moon” block we see in the Shodokan version of Seisan kata. It is also a technique that we see being used repeatedly in Suparinpei in order to bring the opponent’s head down.

From this position, the defender thrusts the right arm—what looks like a nukite—under the opponent’s throat (fig. 1.42). This is immediately followed by a step—either with the left foot or with first the right and then the left—to face the original front of the kata. At the same time, holding the top of the opponent’s head with the left hand, the defender pulls up (or pushes up) on the opponent’s chin with the right hand, twisting the neck (fig. 1.43).



**Figure 1-41** While the first of the circular blocks in this sequence of Suparinpei kata is used to break a clinch or get inside the opponent's arms, the second circular block is used to attack the opponent's head, accompanied by a shifting forward into shiko dachi.



*Figure 1-42 The right arm is thrust under the opponent's throat.*



**Figure 1-43** The finishing position of the hands, ending in the final signature posture of Suparinpei, is a result of twisting the head. The attacker's chin is in the right hand, while the left hand controls the top of the head. We often make the mistake of trying to interpret applications based solely on the ending positions rather than the techniques that lead up to them.

I wonder about the realism of techniques that look as if they would only work in the dojo with a compliant partner or those interpretations that don't seem to follow kata. I'm not trying to denigrate any of these instructors, nor disparage their ideas. We're all trying to figure out kata. But such inventive analyses confuse legitimacy with creativity; we look at these interpretations with a mixture of confusion and awe, and think, "Gee, I never thought of that." But are all creative interpretations equally valid? Is that the point of kata, to foster creativity? It seems to me that even if we consider it "art," we don't have license to interpret it any way we want. The idea is not to impose meaning on what seems to be random and arbitrary, but to *discover* meaning, to figure out what the artist—in this case, the creator of a kata—was trying to communicate.



*Figure 1-44 The barn dojo at night.*

Even theory in science, for example, is not simply invention; it's based on an understanding of the underlying principles. Have we forgotten what we learned of the scientific method in middle school? We seem to be living in an age where science has been shouldered aside, where skepticism seems to be leveled at scientific inquiry and tabloid journalism has become the norm. Perhaps that's part of the problem. Who are we following on this proverbial path through the woods? Or is everyone simply striking out on his or her own? Seems as though there should be some signposts along the way—the martial principles, for example, that all too often seem to be ignored. Is this why we are all still stumbling along without lanterns to light the way?

# FALL



*Solvitur ambulando* (“It is solved by walking.”)

—DIOGENES, FOURTH-CENTURY-BCE GREEK PHILOSOPHER. THOUGH I MUCH  
PREFER CHRISTOPHER MCDUGALL’S MORE COLLOQUIAL TRANSLATION:  
“WHEN IN DOUBT, WALK.”

# The Homogenization of Technique

I was thinking about this the other day ... our tendency to homogenize things that are similar, how over time we smooth out the edges and look for commonalities until we've erased the differences altogether. That may be overstating the case, but it got me to thinking.

I was out for a walk in the woods, engaging in a bit of "woods bathing," when a particularly interesting rock along the side of the trail caught my eye and called to mind the time my father "borrowed" my rock collection. I must have been seven or eight years old. My father was helping out the Boy Scouts with their Klondike Derby. My older brother was in the scout troop—he would go on to become an Eagle Scout and I would become a scout dropout, for which I fault the sixties. Anyway, the Klondike Derby was a sort of winter carnival with the scouts dragging sleds through the snow, completing tasks, and accumulating "gold nuggets." Of course, someone needed to supply the "gold nuggets," and that was the job my father took on. He "borrowed" the big Lincoln Log barrel I had filled up with my special rock collection, spread them all out on his work bench, and spray-painted them all gold. When I found out, I was distraught. My father didn't understand at the time. He offered to get me more rocks, but this was a collection of "special" rocks that I had been collecting for quite some time. They were just rocks I had found on the road or in the woods, but they were all special to a little kid. And they were all different ... at least until they all got a thick coat of gold paint.

I wasn't consciously thinking about childhood events or kicking up "special" stones hidden under the fall leaves. I was just sort of wondering about that unique quality that all things have, especially things that seem similar. You really notice it in the fall, when the trails are covered with leaves. Late in the season, when all the leaves have turned brown, they all seem to be the same unless you look closely. Then, you can't find any two that are really exactly the same. The trails up around Fitzgerald Lake are mostly covered with oak leaves, but still they're all different.

I suppose as humans we have this natural tendency to generalize. We need to generalize in order to identify things, even to recognize people from one day to the next. But really what all of this brought to mind is whether we do this with technique in kata, techniques that may look similar, at least to some extent, but are really different. I think this can be especially true if we rely on appearances rather than how something may function. And it can be subtle, creeping in over time, slowly erasing the differences in techniques until all we see is a redundancy, a repetition of familiar basics.

I'm not at all sure how insidious or widespread this tendency to homogenize may be or how it may have affected kata over the years or generations. Certainly when we name techniques in kata, there is the danger that we may be homogenizing movements that are actually quite different, especially if the names we give the movements are meant solely to describe the look of the movement rather than how it is used.

Take the mawashi techniques that occur in the classical kata of Goju-ryu, for example. I believe there are two kinds of mawashi techniques, but I don't think it really helps much to distinguish between them by calling one a mawashi uke and the other *tora guchi*, as some have done, particularly when some people use these terms rather indiscriminately. I will simply describe how they are used, and that, to a large extent, depends on how they function within a particular sequence of kata moves.

The first of these—one that can legitimately be described as a mawashi uke because it is used as a *receiving* technique (fig. 2.1)—occurs at the end of Sanchin kata, and then at the beginning of Suparinpei, and again at the end of Tensho. But these three kata, I would argue, are the only time this mawashi uke occurs in the classical subjects, the only time it is used as a receiving technique. It is distinguishable because it is done in Basic Stance (*sanchin dachi*). And that is an important distinction.





*Figure 2-1 Beginning movement of the mawashi uke.*



*Figure 2-2 Beginning movement of the other one.*

The key to how it functions can be found in the four paired mawashi uke techniques in the beginning section of Suparinpei kata. Of course, it's odd that this is one of the first techniques a beginner encounters in practicing Goju-ryu, at the end of Sanchin kata, and yet we don't see a self-defense application in the classical subjects until, as an advanced student, we learn Suparinpei. As ironic as that may be, however, we do encounter some similar movements in the other classical subjects that give us clues as to how it is used.

One of these is simply the ubiquitous forearm block we find in many Goju-ryu kata (fig. 2.3).



**Figure 2-3** *The outside forearm block that occurs in Seisan, Shisochin, and Seipai kata.*

The other is the grab and nukite technique encountered in the first sequence of Seiunchin kata (fig. 2.4).

In order to understand how this mawashi uke is used in Suparinpei, you have to separate the paired mawashi techniques at the beginning of the kata. The first mawashi technique is done with the right arm pushing in, while the second is done with the left arm pushing in. The final technique of this series, a right hand grab and left nukite attack, is shown only once, following the second mawashi. In application, however, this grab and nukite attack is meant to follow the first mawashi uke. The grab and nukite attack done on the opposite side would follow the second mawashi uke—the one that pushes is with the left arm.



*Figure 2-4 The grab and nukite from the first sequence of Seiunchin kata.*

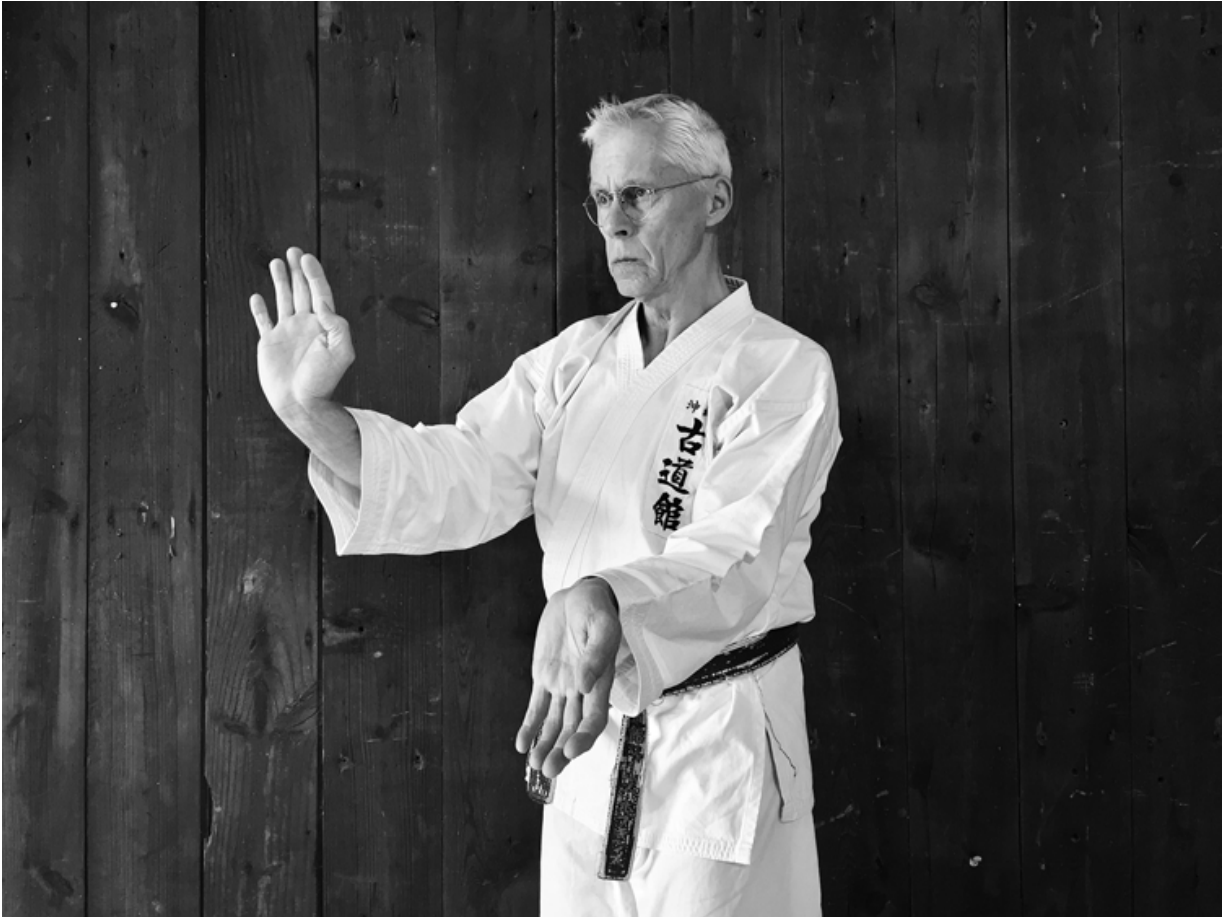
The other point that needs to be understood here is that Suparinpei—like Shisochin, Sanseiru, and Seisan—begins from a double-arm kamae posture, with both arms held in front of the body, like the beginning posture most often associated with Sanchin kata. This is a grappling posture, for lack of a better term. Now, imagine that the opponent has adopted a similar position, either grabbing with both hands or coming in with a clinch reminiscent of a judo posture. The defender's right arm pushes in against the opponent's left arm, while the left hand comes underneath to grab and twist the attacker's arm, bringing the head down. The defender's right hand then grabs the head or hair of the attacker as the left open hand attacks the opponent's neck and chin (fig. 2.5–2.6).



**Figure 2-5** *How the mawashi uke technique from Suparinpei begins against the opponent's clinch.*



**Figure 2-6** *The continuation of the mawashi uke technique, before the nukite attack to the head.*



*Figure 2-7 The ending position for each of the mawashi techniques.*

The second mawashi-like technique (fig. 2.2) occurs at the end of Saifa, at the end of Seipai, at the end of Seisan, in the middle of Kururunfa and again at the end, and it is shown three times in Suparinpei (interestingly both kinds occur in Suparinpei). Each of these mawashi-like techniques is done in Cat Stance. Again, the stance is a key point. The difference is in how they function. This second mawashi-like technique is a finishing technique, meant to twist the head or break the neck of the opponent. These techniques are tacked onto the end of longer bunkai sequences in the classical kata. They function differently from the other mawashi and consequently should be done differently in kata, I believe. More specifically, when the mawashi is associated with the Cat Stance (which itself implies a knee kick), the left hand does not need to pass under the right elbow or forearm, or, on the other side, the right hand does not pass under the left elbow or forearm. When the mawashi is associated with sanchin dachi, the right hand *does* pass under the left elbow or forearm, or,

on the other side, the left hand passes under the right elbow or forearm. What gets confusing, I suppose, is that the end position—both palms facing forward with one hand pointing up and the other pointing down—looks the same, except for the stance (fig. 2.7).

These are the two kinds of mawashi techniques we see in the classical kata of Goju-ryu, and, on second thought, they probably have nothing to do with rocks and trees and walking in the woods. But when the paths diverge, I can't help thinking of that line from Robert Frost.



# Say What?

Last fall I was startled by a bright-red maple tree as I turned up the trail just beyond the pine forest. The woods opened up a bit and the deciduous trees seemed to take over. The white pines were still there, but they were mostly small and spindly. Here it seemed to be mostly maples and oak trees and some shagbark hickories. But this year there seemed to be no bright-red maple tree standing sentinel at the bend in the trail. I wondered for a minute where it had gone. There was no evidence that a tree had fallen here or been cut down. And yet this was exactly where I had seen it last year. Then I realized that it was only the colors that had changed; there were no bright reds or even oranges this year. The weather had not cooperated. I suppose it would be better, and a bit more reliable, if I learned how to identify each tree by the look of its bark, though even then you can see that the bark of a tree varies sometimes depending on its age.

I'm reminded of something Krishnamurti said about trees:

Do you know that even when you look at a tree and say, "That is an oak tree," or "that is a banyan tree," the naming of the tree ... has so conditioned your mind that the word comes between you and actually seeing the tree? To come in contact with the tree you have to put your hand on it....<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Jiddu Krishnamurti, *Freedom from the Known* (San Francisco: Harper, 2009), 16.

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What Krishnamurti seems to point to is the idea that we need to experience the world around us—that simply to be content with the naming of things is not enough. There's a similar idea expressed in a well-known Zen koan attributed to Shuzan. I first encountered it in a wonderful little book of Zen stories by Paul Reps.



**Figure 2-8** This technique, from Saifa kata, is probably a downward forearm strike in application rather than a back-fist or uraken.

In many of them, we see a teacher or one of the Zen patriarchs trying to instruct a disciple, and in the process, trying to get the student to understand something about the nature of reality without the imperfections and pitfalls of language. In this story, Shuzan holds out his short staff and says: “If you call this a short staff, you oppose its reality. If you do not call it a short staff, you ignore the fact. Now what do you wish to call this?” Mumon’s comment: “It cannot be expressed with words and it cannot be expressed without words. Now say quickly what it is.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>-Ekai, “The Gateless Gate,” in Paul Reys and Nyogen Senzaki, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones: A Collection of Zen and Pre-Zen Writings* (Boston: Tuttle, 1998), 127.

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I thought of this story recently when I came across a discussion some students were having about a posture in Sanseiru kata. In this particular posture, the kata practitioner is in Front Stance (*zenkutsu dachi*) with the

right arm up, elbow jutting forward, and the open left hand in front of the chest. I think they called it something like *chudan-uke/mae-geri/hiji-ate*, which, of course, along with the middle-level block and front kick, described how one arrived at this elbow-up posture as well.



**Figure 2-9** This technique from *Seiunchin* is used to attack the opponent's neck with the forearm because the opponent's head has been pulled down in the previous moves of the sequence. It is not used to block a low attack.

I guess you have to call it something, but the problem is that once you call it something you begin to think of it only in those terms. The half-fist in *Saifa* kata, for example, is only thought of as an attack because we refer to it as a fist; we limit our ability to see it in any other way. Yet within the second and third sequences of the kata, the half-fist is more likely to be used as a pull-down technique, grabbing the opponent's shoulders from behind and pulling the opponent down onto the front knee.

When you name something, you tend to pigeonhole it. You limit the “experiential” identity of the thing. This is particularly true of kata

techniques. When you refer to a technique in kata as a *hiji-ate* (elbow strike), then that's the way you think of it in application or bunkai. What if the name, *hiji-ate*, is meant merely as a descriptor? In other words, the teacher is using a shorthand method of saying, "Do the technique that looks like an elbow attack."



**Figure 2-10** In this technique from *Shisochin*, the left hand has grabbed the top of the opponent's head or hair, and the right palm, carrying the opponent's chin, is forcefully thrust up until it ends in what appears to be a vertical elbow strike. (See "Imagine That," fig. 3.18, for the formal position shown in kata.)

When the T'ai Chi teacher says, "Do the technique that looks like parting the wild horse's mane," he doesn't mean the application is to part a wild horse's mane. Nor does he mean that you use that odd bending-over technique to search for a "needle at the bottom of the sea." Calling a posture a Cat Stance doesn't have anything to do with its application.

Words are sometimes more confusing than if we didn't have the words in the first place. But how would you teach if you didn't have the words to

describe what you were doing? That's really a rhetorical question, I suppose. Sometimes I think people in the old days used words to intentionally hide what they were doing, or at least the meanings of moves in kata. Give a technique a descriptive name—a poetic name is even better—and someone not in the know, an outsider, might pick up the kata movements but never guess their meanings, the applications.

You don't really need any words to teach karate, I think. You only need to demonstrate—first kata and then bunkai. Words can be misleading. Is there a *sokoto-geri* in Sanseiru kata or is it a *hiki-ashi*? Or maybe it's really a *hiza-geri*? Is there a *kaiko-ken zuki* (Crab-Shell Fist) in Saifa kata, or does it just look like that, and you are really grabbing the opponent at the shoulders—the fingers digging into the trapezius muscles—and pulling him down? Is the name describing the application, or simply what the technique looks like? How can you think of it as a pulling technique if you call it a strike? If you call it an *uraken-uchi* (back-fist strike) in Seiunchin, does that become the explanation of the application? Will you be able to see it as a forearm strike if you call it *uraken*? Is it really a block just because you call it a *gedan barai*? (See the illustration in “Seiunchin Once Again,” fig. 1.34.)

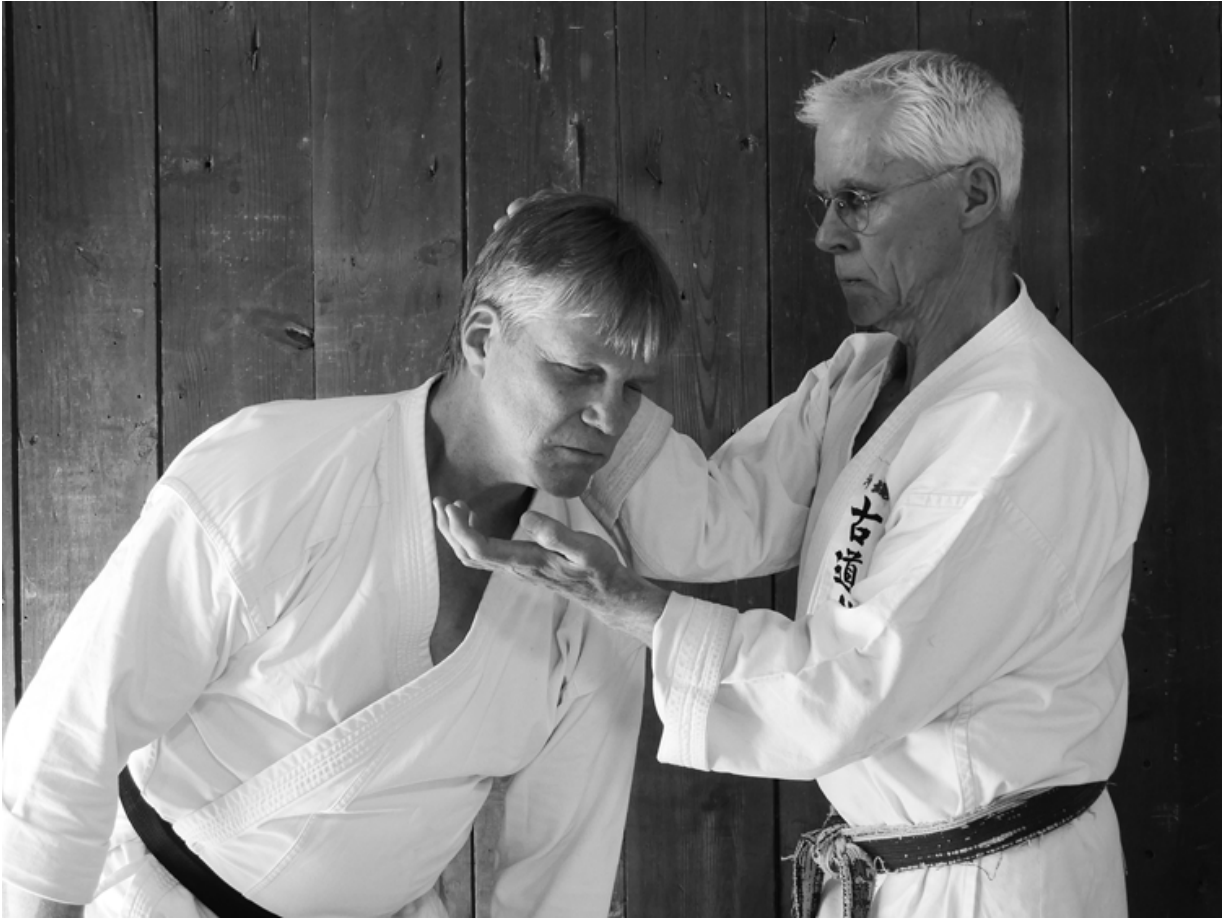
What we call things influences how we look at them; we are tied to language. But we must remember that they are just “words, words, words,” as Hamlet tells Polonius. Sometimes I think that words are the biggest obstacle to people understanding kata and bunkai, as ironic as that may be for me to say—that and convention.

# **It's a System, Like the Trees in the Forest**

The forest was wet today. Droplets of water collected in the leaves here and there, and the moss looked a brighter green after the rain we had overnight. But the temperature is dropping gradually, the days are getting shorter, and most of the trees are bare. It's hard to tell which trees are dead this time of year. The only thing that seems to be thriving is the lichen and small colonies of mushrooms clinging to the old tree trunks that lie rotting by the side of the trail.

When I'm out in the woods these days, I don't usually think of the forest as an ecosystem, though I know it is. I know that when the larger trees fall, after a strong rain or a heavy storm with high winds, they leave a hole in the canopy overhead and the wild grasses, the ground cover, and the acorns lying buried beneath the leaves, some waiting patiently for years, will start to grow in the spring, reaching for the sunlight that's finally been able to make its way through the leaves of the taller trees.

No, when I'm out walking in the woods these days, I'm just looking for the seemingly random beauty you can find when you go out "forest bathing." Nothing seems at all systematic. Everything seems chaotic and haphazard. Branches broken off after a heavy rainstorm are strewn at odd angles across the trail, and I'm hesitant to move anything from where nature decided to put it, even though I know that all of this is accidental, and accidents are as much a part of the natural world as anything else. I wonder if in some metaphysical sense accidents, which seem random by nature, could be part of a system? Seems to me, I remember reading something about accidents playing a big role in evolutionary biology. Perhaps systems are not at all incompatible with what may, at least on the surface, appear random.



**Figure 2-11** This technique, taken out of context and without being able to see the rest of the sequence, might be from the opening sequence of Seiunchin kata, or Seipai kata, or Suparinpei kata.



**Figure 2-12** This is the starting position of the final technique in the last sequence of Seipai kata. The defender has hold of the opponent's head, prior to twisting and throwing the opponent.





**Figure 2-13** *In this position, from the third sequence of Kururunfa kata, the defender has hold of the head prior to twisting it and throwing the opponent.*

Like the forest. I know, despite appearances, that it is a system, just like any martial art, despite what some may imply when they suggest that a style like Goju-ryu, for example, is a random collection of kata that come from different sources, created by different people at different periods in the past. While this may be true (and probably is, given that the structure of the Goju classical subjects varies considerably), it does not change the fact that it's a system. The different kata show variations, as if they were jazz compositions, as if different composers were given the same melody and told to improvise. One need only compare techniques from different kata to see the variations, to appreciate how different techniques explore similar themes. Certainly there are differences—any given self-defense scenario may vary depending on one's position in relationship to the attacker or, for that matter, what the initial attack is—but the apparent similarity of some techniques and the fact that they are used in a very similar manner

underscores the notion that they are all part of the same system, regardless of whether or not the different classical subjects may have had different origins.



**Figure 2-14** This is the beginning knee kick to the opponent's ribs after the initial arm bar in Sanseiru kata. (See "Things Aren't Always What They Seem," page 106, to see the technique that precedes this. See also pages 159 and 199.)

The key here, of course, is to understand the applications. You can't rely solely on the appearance of the techniques (though comparing techniques that look similar is a good place to start). This is admittedly a challenge. We have to first let go of our expectations, which may include not only what the technique *appears* to be, but also what we may have been *told*—in other words, the conventional interpretation of the techniques in question. The problem may be compounded by texts and pictures that seem to record "end" positions; that is, it's difficult to convey in pictures or words what happens in between the pictures one generally sees in karate manuals that

discuss kata, and it's often in the space between one move and the next that we see how a given technique is applied.



**Figure 2-15** One of the knee kicks in the long middle sequence of Shisochin, after employing the signature open-hand blocks and attacks for which the kata is named.



**Figure 2-16** What looks like a straight punch in Saifa kata may actually be a neck break, with the opponent's chin in the right hand and the head or hair (topknot) in the left.



**Figure 2-17** *The head-twisting neck break toward the end of the last sequence in Seipai kata, with the opponent's hair or topknot in the closed left hand and the chin in the right hand.*

And you need the whole system. You need all eight classical kata in order to address different scenarios on the one hand, and on the other, to be able to see how to move from one technique in one kata to a similar sequence in another kata if the dynamics of the situation change. You need to see the similarities and variations in order to alter your counterattack. And once you “see” the similarities and variations, you should be able to move back and forth between the techniques of different sequences of moves, both within a single kata and between different kata. This is the way a system works.

Some have suggested that any single kata is a complete system of self-defense in itself, and there have been a number of books and training regimens that seem to lend this a certain credence with many karate practitioners. But this seems a bit short-sighted to me. It gets in the way of “seeing” the whole system and being able to work comfortably within the

system. Metaphorically, it's like being lost in the woods, failing to see the forest for the trees.

## Rooting in Sanchin

We used to head up to the White Mountains every Columbus Day. We'd start out early in the morning and, after a three or four hour drive, try to hit the mountain by ten in the morning. One of our favorites was the Franconia Notch trail that runs north along a narrow ridge that connects Mount Liberty, Little Haystack, Mount Lincoln, and Mount Lafayette. Most of the hikes in the White Mountains, at least if you're going up to the summit, are all-day affairs, but Franconia was especially nice to take the kids up when they were little, though we often had to tell long, drawn-out stories to get them all the way up. It was *Macbeth* one year and *Lonesome Dove* the next. The rule was that every time we stopped to rest, the story stopped too. But when you get to the top, the trail along the ridge can be spectacular on a clear day; you can see down both sides and there's nothing to block the view.

One year, it was fairly warm at the bottom where we parked the car—warm for the end of October, anyway—but by the time we got to the summit, it was quite a bit colder, and there was two or three feet of snow. We passed another family with a teenage daughter on the narrow path that led along the ridge. The daughter, dressed in fashionable sweatpants and a pair of pink sneakers, was sitting on a rock by the side of the trail. She was crying and sniffing and refusing to go on. She looked miserable. Her father was trying to reason with her. “You can’t just stay here,” he argued. But she wouldn’t move. When her father suggested they turn around and go back down, she said, “No, I’m not going.” When her father suggested they continue in the direction they were going, she wailed, “No, I’m not going.” Her father was clearly getting frustrated with the situation, and the girl, blaming her father for her own misery and all the perceived ills of the natural world, decided she would make everyone around her as miserable as she was. She wanted another choice—one that didn’t entail walking anywhere in the cold for the next few hours. The funny part—if there was anything funny about being on the top of a snow-covered mountain in the late afternoon with the only option being a four-hour hike in either direction with someone clearly not dressed for it—was how simple the situation

appeared from the outside. They couldn't stay there for long, so the only choice—and they were both really the same—was which way to go down. Whether they went forward or back, it was about the same distance. It wasn't really a Hobson's choice, but it seemed almost as simple.

We left them there, so I don't know what eventually happened to them. I suppose they made it down, since we didn't see any rescue helicopters that afternoon, and we haven't found any bodies strewn along the trail over the past few years.

Anyway, we continued on, but it wasn't quite the hike we had planned. The wind picked up and it started to snow. The rocky path along the ridge got more and more treacherous. However, we knew the trail, having hiked it many times before, and we knew that it would be a lot easier once we made it down to the tree line, and chances were there wouldn't be any snow down there. But up on the top, the path could be slippery, and it was no place to fall and get seriously hurt. Of course, we always tell our kids not to fall, or "Be careful; don't slip," as if they had any say in the matter.

But of course, you do have some say in the matter. All you have to do is keep your feet under you. Is that a little too obvious? I would always say this half-jokingly to my kids when we went hiking. That's all there is to it, really, though it may be considerably harder to do than it might seem. After all, that's really, I have come to believe, a good deal of what Sanchin is about, isn't it? Balance. Rooting. Sinking. Down power. Lowering your center. You can't carry your weight too high, which is certainly a problem when everyone is telling you to stand up straight, pull your shoulders back, and push your chest out. That whole posture we associate with standing at attention seems a bit wrong-headed from a martial standpoint. When I see this sort of posture, it always reminds me of the roosters that used to strut about the henhouse on my grandfather's farm. Sanchin, it seems to me, should be a bit more natural and perhaps a bit easier to maintain.





**Figure 2-18** Stance and posture training with the nigiri-gama or gripping jars.

How difficult should it be to just stand in sanchin dachi with your hips tucked under slightly and your center of gravity between your feet—from front to back and from side to side—and keep it there as you move and execute fairly simple techniques? Of course, your knees also have to be over your feet and slightly bent, and your spine needs to be straight. It's the same thing that T'ai Chi practitioners are trying to work out when they engage in "pushing hands," I imagine. It's often said that Kanryo Higashionna was able to stand in Sanchin posture while four people pushed and pulled him from different directions. But in a piece written by Genkai Nakaima, *Memories of My Sensei*, Miyagi Chojun sensei tells the young student that he himself might have "performed Sanchin well only once out of thirty times" he practiced it.

How difficult is it? It's incredibly difficult. I think most of us tend to fall forward even when we walk, or we slump and sag and weave wherever we go. Or we work on balance and down power when we do Sanchin, and

that's it—that is, if we even realize we should be working on balance and rooting and down power and putting our center or mind in the *tanden* (*dantien*). I think most people's Sanchin is too hard and their focus is on being hard. The martial arts is all about balance, and balance extends outward into all aspects of life. You just have to keep your feet under you. Simple, really.



*Figure 2-19 Without a strong root, the tree falls.*

## Trails and Suparinpei

I was out in the woods the other day, off the north end of Fitzgerald Lake, and took a wrong turn. I was looking down, careful not to step on any rocks hidden under the blanket of oak leaves, and I missed the hill trail. I don't usually come in from the north end, so, lost in thought, I missed the turnoff and just kept on up the lower trail that goes around the edge of the lake. It's still a nice trail, but it's not as isolated, and for some reason I don't find it quite as beautiful. But heading into winter changes things; there's less vegetation. Some days the trees look as if they're suspended on strings from low-hanging clouds. Stripped of their leaves, they could be members of some army standing guard along the trail dressed in gray fatigues. Where the forest is thickest, the trunks are fairly straight, with few branches to break the uniformity of this vertical maze that recedes into the distance.

I'm always tempted to head up along a ridge and bushwhack through the bare undergrowth this time of year, but there's something I really like about trails. I don't know whether it's the perception that they go somewhere, that they impose a sort of order on the otherwise chaotic wooded world, or whether it's a natural human desire for perspective, something the early Renaissance painters realized might satisfy some vague human longing. Who knows? I suspect that trails remind us of that temporal aspect to life—we begin in one place, look as far down the road as we can, and then walk toward that end. In other words, some sort of order. One thing follows another as predictably as our feet follow the trail, and everything is just as it should be, just as if we were sitting in a concert hall waiting for that final chord to resolve predictably on the tonic or Shakespeare to dish out everyone's just deserts in the final scene. We are afforded a spectator's view of the wild and untamed as we brush by the tangles of bushes and errant limbs along the trail.



*Figure 2-20 This double “punch” occurs in both Sanseiru and Suparinpei kata.*

In the same way, we have imposed a sort of order on the classical canon of Goju-ryu. And yet, for the most part, it’s completely arbitrary. About the only thing that we can say, because there is some variation between various schools, is that Sanchin is first, followed by Saifa kata, and Suparinpei is last. But why? There are things here it feels as though we will never know—just like the historical relationship between Suparinpei and Sanchin and Seisan and Sanseiru—these four. They all begin from a double-arm closed-fist *kamae* in Basic Stance. They all begin with “blocks” and “punches.” Many of the techniques in Suparinpei can be found in some form in these three other kata. There are the double “punches” we see in Sanseiru (fig. 2.20). There is the “crane’s beak” technique in shiko dachi at the end of both Sanseiru and Suparinpei, not to mention the techniques just before the ending of Suparinpei that look as though they are from Seisan. Then there are the opening *mawashi* techniques of Suparinpei that utilize Basic Stance,

something we only find in one other kata: Sanchin. And there are certainly other similarities as well.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Oral tradition suggests that at one time there were three versions of Suparinpei—*jo* (upper level), *chu* (middle level), and *ge* (lower level). Is it possible, given the similarity and in some cases the redundancy of technique, that Seisan and Sanseiru were the two other variations of Suparinpei kata?

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There are, of course, techniques in Suparinpei that remind one of Seiunchin, and Shisochin also begins with a double-arm kamae and three “punches.” The middle section of Shisochin, in fact, is reminiscent of Suparinpei, with its two open-hand blocks, followed by a kick and, in this case, a *vertical* elbow attack. But the similarities between Sanchin, Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei are unmistakable. (See, “Authentic Movement,” page 117, for a comparison of the end postures of Sanseiru and Suparinpei.)

And yet I have no idea what it implies, other than some sort of historical connection. Were these four kata the original or somehow older kata of an Okinawan-based system? Do they all begin from a double-arm kamae because there was some sort of link to the old indigenous form of Okinawan sumo? And if that’s the case, does it affect how we should be looking at the bunkai for each of these kata? If the other subjects were not part of this original syllabus, why were they incorporated into the system? Is the connection thematic—the tendency to twist the head is certainly common to all of them—or completely arbitrary? Or do they all simply emphasize a close-quarters sort of combat? If the “other” kata—Saifa, Seiunchin, Shisochin, and Kururunfa (I am omitting Tensho for obvious reasons)—are really from another source, is that why they are, with the exception of Kururunfa, stuck together at the beginning of the curriculum in many schools, or is that also coincidental? Or does that order have to do with a progression of sorts, moving from single hand grabs to grappling scenarios?

For that matter, why do Uechi and Goju—often referred to as “sister” styles—both share Sanchin, Sanseiru, and Seisan, and not the other kata?



***Figure 2-21** This open-hand block and attack, or double blocking position, occurs in both Seisan and Suparinpei.*

The structure of Suparinpei would, at first glance, seem to be different from the other three kata. Seisan and Sanseiru are very clearly bunkai kata; that is, they are composed of three bunkai sequences shown in their entirety, with basic techniques tacked onto the beginning of each kata—the slow “punches” in the case of Sanseiru and the three sets of three basic techniques and a down side kick in Seisan. Sanchin, on the other hand, is an almost laboriously repetitive kata, with its slow punches returning to the double-arm kamae posture, though here also there are coincidentally three techniques: the slow punches and blocks, the grab and pull-in coupled with the open-hand pushing out and down technique (also found in Seisan), and the end mawashi technique.

However, Suparinpei, despite appearances, particularly in reference to the repetitions at the beginning of the kata—techniques that are done four times in four different directions—is actually quite similar to Seisan. There are

three complete bunkai sequences shown here (one of which shows variations or two different finishing techniques), all occurring after the repetitions of fundamental techniques at the beginning. Of particular note is the final bunkai sequence (the series of techniques that ends the kata), which borrows techniques from both Seisan and Sanseiru. And Suparinpei is the only kata besides Sanchin where you will find the mawashi uke in sanchin dachi—that is, the only place it is really used as an uke.

This may all be much ado about nothing, as Shakespeare might have said, but it's curious when each of the classical subjects seems to present unique self-defense scenarios, subtle variations of theme but no redundancy of movement ... except Suparinpei. Even if we were only to consider these seemingly related kata, there are apparently three somewhat unique kata and then Suparinpei, which seems to have borrowed from each. Why? Am I looking for things to fit together too neatly when they most likely came from disparate sources, developing over time? After all, the trails through the woods veer off in all sorts of different directions. Who's to say what's a wrong trail anyway? But then again, it's food for thought.



# What's Wrong with That Guy's Kata?

Winter's coming. I can tell because the last hard rain took most of the leaves off the sycamore tree in the backyard. It has been a wonderful fall. The leaves, though not as varied as other years perhaps, have been beautiful, especially walking the trails out around Fitzgerald Lake. Since I retired, I feel as though I've finally got the time to really look at things. Like leaves. Millions of leaves out in this little hundred-acre wood—though it's actually a little bigger than that classic world of Christopher Robin and Pooh.

Yet it's easy to approach these paths with the wonder of a child on beautiful fall days. And I find myself stopping to pick up and examine leaves the way my children did when they were two or three or four years old. Even on walks into town they would pause to collect special rocks that might glint with mica or bright-yellow dandelions. When we returned I'd find my pockets stuffed with the treasures of childhood, and we would line them up, for admiring, on the back kitchen steps.

No two leaves are exactly the same, at least in the fall when they change colors and the slow and inevitable process of decay begins. Of course, there's an analogy lost in there somewhere, covered over with piles of autumn leaves. It reminds me of something my daughter said one day, watching her brother finish a bowl of ice cream that he had said he wasn't going to eat. Something about Newton's first law of motion, or was it Galileo's concept of inertia? Anyway, it got me to thinking about kata.

For years, I've wondered why there were differences, some subtle and perhaps insignificant and some quite glaring, between how the different schools of Okinawan Goju-ryu did kata. If Higa Seiko sensei and Miyagi Chojun sensei both studied under Higashionna sensei, and Yagi (Meibukan), Toguchi (Shoreikan), and Miyazato (Jundokan) all studied under Miyagi or Higa (or both), then why were there differences in how some of the Goju-ryu classical kata were performed? The only explanation I could imagine (if we rule out faulty transmission) is that different teachers' understandings—or perhaps execution—of the bunkai informed (or

changed) the way they did kata. Or, put another way, they each had different ideas of how best to accomplish the same thing. Over time, these subtle differences became more pronounced, until certain moves in kata took on what became, by appearances at least, obvious differences. That is, perhaps they all knew the same bunkai (one specific bunkai, I would suggest), but each did it a little differently, depending on body type, movement, and so on.



*Figure 2-22 This position from Sanseiru is the same in all the Goju schools.*

A case in point is Sanseiru kata. Of the classical Goju-ryu kata, Sanseiru seems to exhibit the most striking differences between the four major schools of Okinawan Goju: Shodokan, Meibukan, Shoreikan, and Jundokan. One of the more glaring examples of these differences might be this double open-hand move found in the middle of the kata (fig. 2.23). It is done first to the left (west) side (shown) and then to the right (east) side. In the first of these, as it is done in Shodokan schools (Higa), we see a left, palm-up chest-level “block” with a right, hooking upper-level palm

“strike,” in Basic Stance. In the other three schools of Goju, the kata shifts into a right-foot-forward shiko dachi, with the right arm, hand open, in an upper-level blocking position, and the left hand, palm up, striking with what seems to be a nukite (fig. 2.24). They look very different, both the feet and the hands. But suppose neither one is actually wrong? Suppose they are actually executing the same bunkai?



*Figure 2-23 The Shodokan version of this open-hand controlling or bridging technique from Sanseiru.*

The difficulty is that most schools, regardless of which version of this technique they practice, attempt to interpret it as an isolated technique rather than part of a sequence with a beginning, a middle, and an end. This is, in fact, the way most kata analysis seems to be done. In this sort of scenario, it is assumed that one hand must be blocking and the other hand must be attacking. In the Shodokan version, we imagine that the left (lower) hand is blocking, while the right open palm is attacking. In the other version

of this technique, we imagine that the right (upper) arm is blocking, while the left open palm is attacking.

But what if this is not the initial technique or uke but the controlling or bridging technique? And instead of the left hand blocking and the right hand attacking (Shodokan), or vice-versa (the other schools), both hands are grabbing the opponent's head: the lower hand grabs the chin, while the upper hand grabs the head. Utilizing the position of either of these seemingly different techniques from different schools accomplishes the same thing. What allows us to get to this point—being able to grab the opponent's head with both hands—is the receiving or initial entry technique, the double-arm kamae technique or two-arm scissor technique (fig. 2.25) we see at the beginning of the kata (see “Patterns or Structure of Kata,” page 129). This is the same technique that we find beginning each of the turning sequences in the middle of the kata.



**Figure 2-24** The final bridging technique from Sanseiru as it is done in most other schools of Okinawan Goju-ryu.



**Figure 2-25** The “core” receiving technique of Sanseiru starts with a step off line, with the arm closest to the attacker intercepting the attack on the outside. Then the other arm comes up inside to scissor the attacker’s arm. The front hand then grabs the chin as the rear hand hooks around to grab the head.

So, if one looks at it this way, it suggests that the teachers who originally learned from Higashionna sensei or Miyagi sensei, and went on to establish their own schools, knew and practiced the same bunkai, even though their respective kata may look quite different. And, of course, this bunkai—moving to attack the head or neck—fits the general tenor of techniques in the Goju classical subjects. The double “punch” technique—the same in each of these schools—shows the grabbing and twisting of the head, as the hands go from the open-hand to closed-hand position.

The problem, then, if this is indeed the case, is perhaps not with the differences found in the different schools but in later followers who never learned the original bunkai and had to fend for themselves in attempting to interpret movement that was perhaps idiosyncratic and certainly a bit cryptic without the original teacher there to explain it. In other words, the

differences in kata do not necessarily point to differences in bunkai. Which, I suppose, in the best of liberal traditions, suggests that it may be more fruitful to find commonality in things that differ to some degree than to dwell on differences in things that seem by and large so similar. To be clear, I am not suggesting that all bunkai are correct, just that that other guy's kata, as different as it may look, may be just as "correct," or at least fundamentally the same. What was it Robert Frost said? Two roads diverged in a yellow wood ... and in the end, they led to the same place?

When it comes to leaves, however, I can't help noticing, and appreciating, their wonderful variety and stunning beauty. I may turn into a rabid leaf peeper yet. And isn't it ironic that we take notice of their incredible beauty in the fall, just as they're on the verge of dying?

# Why We Train

Off in the woods the other day, I decided it was a good day to check out the Lost Boulder Trail. The leaves had covered the trail so much that I had to stop every so often to look for the white blazes on the trees. It surprised me that the blanket of leaves had fallen so uniformly that it was difficult to see any evidence of a trail—the leaves had not been matted down either by the rain or passing hikers. Looking off into the woods, single leaves fell slowly through the bare branches of distant trees.

Every year, I suppose, it's the same—the trees grow a bit, seedlings die off, the undergrowth along the trail finds a bit of sunlight, and it hangs on for another year. Of course, the hikers change. Some don't come anymore, while others appear for the first time. Yet the experience is the same. I often wonder what it is that draws us to the woods. What is it about the healing or restorative experience of a walk in the woods?

But then I realize I don't know anything more about the desire we have for walking woodland trails than I understand why people practice the martial arts. What is it that draws us to practice an archaic form of self-defense in an age when, for most of us, there is little call to defend ourselves against violent physical attacks, and, if there were, would they come in a form where our karate or kung fu training would be useful? I'm reminded of that scene in *The Seven Samurai*, I think it was (or was it *Yojimbo*?), where the guy simply pulls a pistol from the folds of his kimono and shoots the guy standing in front of him, the guy who's threatening him with a sword. The world changes.

And yet, perhaps we're looking to connect with history, something larger than ourselves, something real and authentic.

I often find myself wondering why people train the martial arts. We don't live in a particularly threatening environment, at least most of us. At least it's not like feudal times. And most of the people I know who train karate aren't the type to go around looking for a fight. Most don't even frequent places where fights break out. So why train something that, by all appearances, seems so anachronistic?



**Figure 2-26** The first move in the Shoreikan two-person set/bunkai for Gekisai Ichi (also known as Gekisai Sho).

I thought about this recently because I came across a discussion of the place of Gekisai kata in one's training (or Fukyu kata, or the Pinan kata, for that matter). The primary aim of these training subjects, as the evidence suggests, was to popularize karate and provide a healthy program of study for school-age children. While some of the techniques in these training subjects can be found in the classical kata of Goju-ryu—the double punch can be found both in Sanseiru and Suparinpei, and the mawashi occurs repeatedly in Goju kata—techniques such as the jodan uke and the *oi-tsuki* or punch off the forward foot (with the possible exception of the one time we see it in Sanchin) don't occur in the classical Goju kata. And yet, many dojos spend an inordinate amount of time training these subjects, even among senior students. And if not the training subjects themselves, then basics derived from these subjects. Throw in the two-person continuous bunkai for Gekisai Ichi, Gekisai Ni, Gekiha, and Kakuha developed by



Toguchi sensei, and most of your training time can be taken up with subjects that bear little resemblance either to the structure or the principles of the classical kata of Goju-ryu.



*Figure 2-27 A posture from Matayoshi sensei's Kingai ryu that was popularized in the film The Karate Kid.*

Which takes me back to my original question: Why do people train the martial arts? Because on the face of it, what we train in practicing karate, and how we train it, can be vastly different and vary drastically from one dojo or school to the next. Yet training in the martial arts is a kind of brotherhood or sisterhood. But it's still not clear to me why most people train. Is it for exercise, or is it merely that we like the social aspect, working and moving together? Perhaps it's the spiritual nature of martial arts, something that comes with the practice of anything foreign or exotic or things Eastern. Perhaps for some it's the attraction of the strange rituals or the clothes or the language. Or perhaps it's just a form of exercise, though personally I think I'd rather go for a run off in the country, or a bike ride, or

buy a single scull and crew up and down the river—it wouldn't demand quite as much commitment, I think.

Some, I'm sure, see martial arts training as a way to develop self-confidence and even self-defense. They may even believe that they have attained, along with a black belt, some level of menacing lethality or ability to defend themselves. They may even imagine a certain degree of invincibility, if not in terms of self-defense, since most of us are less and less likely to face actual physical encounters outside the dojo, perhaps in terms of being able to face all of the difficulties that life throws at us. The problem is that those who spend so much time training Fukyu or Gekisai kata, and their attendant basic techniques, are not practicing a very lethal system of self-defense. School-boy kata and bunkai were never meant to be lethal. And yet this is what most schools, at least the ones I have seen, tend to put their time and emphasis on. It's ironic, if this is the case, that the more time you spend on martial arts, the less lethal you become as a martial artist—at least if what you're training is the Gekisai/Pinan kind of karate. Perhaps that's overstating the case, but then again.

Yet the other side of the coin is just as curious. Why do we spend years practicing traditional or classical kata and bunkai—how to break someone's neck, for example—in an age where this sort of confrontation, for most of us, is less and less likely? Why do we train something that by all appearances seems so out of date? We just do it, I guess.

# Things Aren't Always What They Seem

The other day I decided to take a break and head out for a hike up Mt. Tom. I had spent most of the week ripping up the old mat in the dojo in preparation for laying down a new wood floor. The canvas cover I scrounged from an Aikido school in town years ago was old when I got it, but we needed something to cover the old wrestling mat we inherited from the university that looked more like a patchwork quilt made of duct tape than anything else. Patching up the canvas cover as it started to show signs of wear had also taken a few more rolls of duct tape the past few years, so it just seemed like the time to move back to a wood floor. And it was a good time to take a break.

The woods were damp from the recent rains and the first yellow leaves were beginning to fall. A few trees had come down in the last storm, their roots not deep enough as they stretched out over the outcropping of rocks along the path. I was coming down the mountain on a trail that wound its way around a small rocky crag when I noticed a dog coming up the other way. He paused for a moment just in front of me, sniffing the ground, and as I stopped to pet him I looked ahead to see his owner leap wildly to the side of the trail, jumping from one foot to the other, waving his arms frantically as if he were trying to disentangle himself from a giant spider's web. After a moment he stopped and continued up the mountain. When he looked up, he must have noticed the quizzical look on my face. "Snake," he said. "I hate snakes." And then we both continued on the trail, he going up and me going down, but both of us, I'm sure, on the lookout for more snakes hiding on the bare rock, hard to pick out amongst the meandering tree roots.

It reminded me of that sketch on *Saturday Night Live* years ago with Bill Murray and Steve Martin. They stare straight into the camera and just keep repeating, "What the hell is that?" Maybe we just don't expect things, or maybe things just aren't always what they seem to be. Kata is a lot like that. We see a move in kata and assume that it's one thing because it looks like that's what it ought to be. We think, well, it looks like a down block, so it

must be a down block. It looks like a double punch, so it must be a double punch.

What we're often missing, I think, is the Tristram Shandy effect, for lack of a better term. Tristram, the title character in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, an eighteenth-century novel by Laurence Sterne, attributes all of his troubles to what happened the moment he was conceived. Just at the crucial point, his mother interrupts his father to ask if he has remembered to wind the hall clock. If I'm remembering it correctly—it's been many years since I last encountered it—the rest of the five hundred or so pages of the story and its hilarious sequence of events can all be attributed to this critical moment, this *momentus interruptus*, if you will.



**Figure 2-28** Beginning of the end mawashi-like technique from Saifa. The sequence begins with the block, sweep, and overhead hammer fist or forearm strike.

Fiction, certainly, but there are connections that are important. Kata is composed of sequences that constitute self-defense scenarios, at least in

Goju-ryu. And each sequence is composed of entry techniques, bridging techniques, and finishing techniques. Too often, teachers and students trying to find bunkai ignore the sequences, as if the techniques are disconnected and unrelated. I think this is why we don't see the right applications sometimes, why we judge things strictly on appearance rather than a technique's function within a given self-defense sequence.



**Figure 2-29** Palm-up technique from Seiyunchin. The right hand is used to grab the head or hair, while the left hand attacks the neck and controls the chin. This position should not be held or seen as a technique in itself. The hand is brought up this way in order to ensure that the elbow is kept down and the forearm is kept in contact with the opponent's arm.

For example: we might look at the opening technique of Seiyunchin and imagine that it must be a release from a two-handed grab or choke hold because both hands look the same—if they look the same, then the temptation is to imagine that they must be doing the same thing. (See “Ah, He’s Just Old. What Does He Know Anyway?,” fig. 4.4, for an illustration of this application.) And the folks that interpret the opening of Seiyunchin

this way imagine that the next technique—when the right palm is raised up (fig. 2.29) and the left hand is brought up into chamber by the ribs—is meant to block and grab the opponent’s next punch. This is the disconnect between these two techniques of the sequence. Somehow the opponent must have pulled away from the previous technique in order to punch. But this interpretation works only in contradiction of the age-old martial principle of *ikken hissatsu* (one punch kill), or is it *ippon kumite*? Perhaps it’s all the same concept; that is, one should move in such a way as to allow your opponent only the one initial attack—the one punch being your opponent’s, not yours. They get the initial attack, of course, because “there’s no first attack in karate.”

Or we might look at the opening technique of Sanseiru (after the three “punches”) and imagine that it must be blocking and grabbing a kick because we’re reaching down, knee level, when in fact, since it is connected to the previous technique, a more logical explanation would be to use an arm bar to bring the opponent down (fig. 2.31). Then, of course, we advance with knee kicks and a head twist.



**Figure 2-30** *The initial contact position of the opening arm bar of Sanseiru kata.*



*Figure 2-31 In the down position, we are using the arm bar, bringing the opponent's head down.*

Or we look at the end mawashi technique of Saifa and imagine that it's a ridge-hand strike, as many would say, simply because we don't see how it's connected to the previous sequence of moves. And again, a more logical explanation, and more in keeping with the general tenor of Goju-ryu, is that it's a neck break or head twist (fig. 2.28) with a knee kick, and the real challenge is to analyze the techniques that precede this mawashi-like technique to see how we got to the opponent's head—that is, what's the initial receiving technique and subsequent bridging technique?

It always makes me think of that old admonition about missing the forest for the trees. I suppose it's natural, but it's also good to remember that things aren't always what they seem.





**Figure 2-32** At Mount Tom, looking across the reservoir. The water was so still that it was hard to tell which was the actual image and which was the reflection.

## On the Dojo Floor ... What of Traditions?

The leaves have finally turned, mostly bright yellows with some hints of orange here and there. They don't seem to be as colorful as they were last year. I could be misremembering, but I think I read somewhere that it had to do with the unusually warm weather we had. Still, it was good to get out into the woods—I had spent almost every day over the past week putting down a new floor in the dojo. I needed the break just to get off in the woods and wander around a bit, listening to the birds. There's a pileated woodpecker off in the swamp most days, hammering away at an old tree. He's there today, but today it sounds an awful lot like pounding nails into grooved flooring boards to me. And I realized, even off in the woods on a beautiful fall day, I was still thinking about the whole process.



*Figure 2-33 New dojo floor.*

I nailed down something like 450 square feet of southern yellow pine, sanded it, and then put a few coats of polyurethane on it, waited a few days, and we were good to go. There are a couple of spots where the grain came up in the sanding, but all in all it looked pretty good. The surprise came when I slipped off my training sneakers and did kata in bare feet. I hadn't trained barefoot on a wooden floor in what seemed like twenty years, at least here in my own dojo. And what with the cold weather setting in soon up here in New England, I would no doubt slip my sneakers back on for the winter.



*Figure 2-34 Hojo undo implements and weapons in the author's dojo.*

But it reminded me, once again, of the traditions we practice, indeed take for granted, in the practice of karate. Slipping our shoes off, bowing to the shrine, all of the ritualized ceremony and language that becomes an

accepted and integral part of training. Certainly in one sense, we are merely respectfully acknowledging the cultural traditions that gave rise to karate. But does the ritual and tradition overshadow the real martial intent of karate? I think it does for some. The “costumes” become more and more elaborate, festooned with colorful badges and elaborate embroidery of kanji characters that the average non-Japanese student can’t even read.

For some others, who fashion themselves “traditionalists,” the ritual of karate training seems to be focused on hojo undo performed with various traditional Okinawan training implements to develop a strong karate body. Some practitioners seem to emphasize this sort of ritualized use of traditional hojo undo implements as if it too satisfies a spiritual need, scoffing at those who put too much emphasis on the study of bunkai, painting everything with the same broad brush, as if the study and practice of bunkai was also a modern invention, like competition sparring or the performance of kata for small plastic trophies.

It’s confusing; I’m not even sure what tradition and ritual in karate even means anymore. That’s why the wood of the dojo floor felt so strange to me, I suppose. I think the last time I trained with any regularity on a polished wood dojo floor was in Okinawa. I suppose it makes more sense to take one’s shoes off and practice on a bare wood floor in a tropical climate than it does in New England. But I’ve also dispensed with the traditional karate uniform, the belt, and, aside from an admittedly though no less heartfelt but perfunctory bow to the shrine, all of the pre-training ritual. I light incense when I have it and can remember, but we don’t address each other with titles—no sensei, no *sempai*, no “*osu*” or other use of Japanese when a simple English term would suffice. You won’t hear “*Moku so*,” “*Kiyotsuke*,” “*Hajime*” here. Heretical, perhaps, but since there are only a few of us old guys—all seniors—the ritual seems a bit unnecessary. And as far as bare feet and wearing a karate gi ... well, it’s pretty cold in New England at least five months out of the year.

Or does the practice of ritual and tradition actually free us, in some sense, to experience karate in a more spiritual way? After all, the practice of kata itself is a kind of ritual. The movements are clearly defined and taught in a very formal manner, with little room for individual differences, and since for most, at least initially, there is little understanding of what the movements mean or how they may be used, there would seem to be little

difference between those who practice karate and those engaged in some arcane religious ceremony. A ritual, by definition, is “a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.” Does it make it more or less spiritual if you don’t know what the movements are for? After all, if you didn’t visualize what you were doing—that is, if you didn’t have any understanding of bunkai or application—then you might be more apt to enjoy the act of movement itself, sort of like yoga, perhaps. In this case, I sometimes wonder if meaning doesn’t get in the way, if understanding bunkai doesn’t somehow detract from one’s enjoyment of the simple act of movement and exercise, and, in the process, a more spiritual experience.



*Figure 2-35 A posture from Seipai.*

And yet I wonder if all of this is not a modern overlay, something fashioned fairly recently and tacked onto what was once only a brutally efficient method of self-defense. And kata? Merely a record of martial applications and fighting principles preserved in kata form for an ancient population that was largely illiterate. Why in individual kata? It’s thematic.

And yet, there is something about slipping off one's shoes and stepping onto the dojo floor, bowing to the shrine, all of the old teachers looking on, the incense burning, and beginning kata. Just kata. Kata for its own sake.

# Authentic Movement

The other day, as I was walking contemplatively through the woods on a warm fall morning, the sun on the trail—I could smell the faint scent of someone burning leaves somewhere off in the neighborhoods that border the conservation area—I was suddenly startled by a garter snake, slipping through the leaves at my feet and winding its way across the path in front of me. I thought I was being careful, quietly taking it all in, gazing off deep into the woods, trying to notice any movement in the trees or the thick cover of leaves that had turned the whole forest floor a uniform shade of brown, and here a young garter snake had been basking in the middle of the trail as unaware of me perhaps as I had been of him. So much for being aware of one's surroundings, I thought.

When I was a kid, growing up in a rural woodsy neighborhood in upstate New York and spending my summers on a farm in western Pennsylvania, where the woods down over the hill always beckoned, we would walk as carefully as we could over the dry grass and twigs, pretending we were Native Americans immersed in our natural environment, as if we were a part of it—scenting the air, imagining we could smell the presence of the animals around us, and our eyes and ears alert to the slightest movement.

Nowadays, for me, a walk in the woods is a kind of moving meditation, my not-quite-so-slow *kinhin*, where I try to be aware of each footfall, each bend in the trail, each tree or rock along the path. In a way, these walks remind me a lot of kata practice, the simple act of doing the same kata after years of practice. At some point—after the thousandth or maybe the ten-thousandth repetition—we no longer have to think about what we're doing; we have learned the “form” of the movement. At that point, there is an awareness that comes into play and supersedes the need to think about what comes next.

I was thinking about all of this no doubt because I had seen a newspaper notice a few days earlier about a class in Authentic Movement. Initially, of course, my natural skepticism crept in, wondering what “authentic” movement was and whether or not some movement was *not* authentic. So I

looked it up. Practitioners, or enthusiasts, suggest that “movement becomes ‘authentic’ when the individual is able to allow their intuitive impulses to freely express themselves without intellectual directive” (Wikipedia).

I could be wrong, but I take that to mean “without thinking” or, in the case of kata, without an awareness of what the movements mean.



**Figure 2-36** *This posture, the last position in both Sanseiru and Suparinpei kata, always seems to mystify, and in fact may be one of the techniques that has suggested the greatest variety of interpretations. One of the problems, I think, is that people try to imagine what they could do from this position instead of seeing it as an end position. How it is applied against an opponent can only be seen in the movement between this posture and the previous posture of the kata.*

I’ve seen many karate schools that practice kata without stopping to question whether there were any applications for the movements they spent so much time on. I once knew a teacher who reprimanded a senior student for trying to use a technique from one of the forms in a prearranged sparring drill. He was told that forms were for working on balance, speed, power, and coordination; they were not for fighting. And in most T’ai Chi



classes I've seen, the students are quite content to do some warm-up exercises (maybe some esoteric-looking Chi Gung) and spend the rest of the time going slowly through the solo form. And even there, ironically, you will often see a teacher make slight, even minuscule, adjustments to a student's form when they don't actually apply the techniques. Are the "corrections" merely aesthetic?



**Figure 2-37** *For some people, the similarity of this posture to statues of Shakyamuni showing the vitarka mudra with one hand and the varada mudra with the other hand is meaning enough.*

Perhaps we need to move as human beings, as living creatures; a lot of people are, after all, fairly sedentary. Perhaps we need to move in such a way that, at the very least, suggests that our movements have meaning, an authenticity that we can only imagine.

When we don't know what the movements mean—trusting only in our imaginations—perhaps it somehow imparts a higher meaning to our movements, maybe even to our lives. If we explained what the movements

were used for, would we somehow be trivializing the experience, making it banal and pedestrian? If we don't explain it, we retain the more mystical, the more spiritual experience. The movement takes on a sensual or inner quality instead of an intellectual one. Maybe it's something like the whirling dervishes in Sufism, only we might be dancing for Guan Yu, the martial deity of ancient China.



*Figure 2-38 The Grand Buddha at Ling Shan.*

Of course, I'm just guessing, but perhaps that's why there are not only so many martial arts schools that only practice forms and kata as movement without meaning, but also maybe why there is such disagreement within styles about the interpretation and analysis of the kata themselves; that is, if we say that kata can be interpreted and applied any way one desires, that there is an intentional ambiguity in kata movement, it's almost the same as saying it has no inherent meaning. And that's pretty much the same as "authentic movement"—movement that allows "intuitive impulses to freely express themselves without intellectual directive." Of course, I may be over-intellectualizing all of this myself. Though I'm not sure how much more mindless movement we need in the world today. Seems to me there's probably way too much of that going on as it is.

## Watching the Deer ... and Movement

I was out hiking on the Lost Boulder Trail a while back when I spotted a young deer standing stock still about fifty feet up the hill. It surprised me. I don't know what had drawn my eyes away from the trail. Most of the time, I think, it's the movements of deer in the woods or the flash of a white tail that you pick up if you're going to see them at all, but this one wasn't moving. From a distance their legs look like young saplings and their tawny coats seem to blend into the backdrop of dead leaves that blanket the hillside. This one didn't seem to be any different; there wasn't anything that would attract the attention of a predator or a solitary hiker. She was well camouflaged. It almost made me think that I had sensed her presence before I saw her, tapping into some primal instinct that we both shared.

As I stood watching, trying to see if there were any others nearby, she sidled forward a few steps and began to nibble on a small mountain laurel, all the while keeping a wary eye on me. But this was really her home, not mine, and after a while, I moved on, heading down the trail, which turned and dropped into a shallow gully, but the deer stayed there until I lost sight of her.

I think this was on my mind—the idea of movement—because I had recently been reading something Bernd Heinrich had written about owls. He had performed an experiment with a friendly owl that had regularly come to roost on a branch above the clearing by his cabin in the Maine woods. At first, he placed a piece of meat on the ground beneath the tree, but the owl showed no interest in it. However, when Heinrich attached a piece of thread to the meat and dragged it under the tree, the owl quickly dove for it and carried it off. Heinrich concluded that the owl responded to movement or, in other words, movement may have been a more important consideration for the owl than sight alone or smell.

Movement is such a nebulous thing to describe or put into words. I was watching a video the other day of a teacher trying to explain the movement of the waist, or *koshi*, in karate, as he slowly twisted his hips to one side and then quickly snapped them back. He did this repeatedly, snapping his

hips back faster and faster. What I was wondering, though, was how a student construes this advice from this sort of demonstration, divorced as it is from technique. Might it give one the wrong impression about how the waist is actually employed? That is, by isolating this use of the waist as an exercise, are we thereby giving students the impression that the waist is something that turns independently of whatever technique is performed? I've seen students actually pull their hips back prior to thrusting them forward with an attack. They seem to be doing this as if it is a movement completely disconnected from the block or parry or whatever receiving technique that precedes it. It becomes a three-part movement: first the waist is twisted, pulling the hip back; then the hip is sharply thrust forward; and then the striking or blocking hand quickly follows. One, two, three.



*Figure 2-39 This technique from Shisochin kata very obviously uses the waist. There is a distinct shift from a Front Stance in one direction to a Front Stance in another direction.*

There's a disconnect here, I think. What usually happens in kata is that the waist turns naturally with the initial block or parrying motion of the

body (the uke). There is a structure to this, usually, because we learn it in Sanchin kata and we incorporate that learned movement in everything, remembering the admonition: “Do not move just one part independently.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Wile, *T'ai-Chi Touchstones*, 113.

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This, of course, is facilitated by the notion that the first (and certainly instinctual) response to an attack is to get out of the way. Even if we can't easily step off line, the body turns to deflect the attack or present a smaller target. The simplest way to picture this is to imagine an opponent stepping in with a right punch.

The defender turns to block the attack with the left forearm to the outside of the opponent's right arm. The defender's waist has naturally turned away, leaving the left hip forward and the right hip pulled back or “loaded.” In the next instant, the defender thrusts forward with a right counterattack. (See “Where Have You Been, My Blue-Eyed Son,” page 30.) In each case, for both the “block” and the attack, the waist and arm move together. I've found that, more often than not, when you try to teach students to use the waist, they will disconnect the waist from the arms and use the arms independently, as if the lower half of the body doesn't know what the upper half is doing—and that seems like a lot of needless expenditure of energy.

On the other hand, if all of this movement of the waist and the arms is done naturally and correctly, blocking and counterattacking takes very little effort. And, of course, this is greatly facilitated by the off-line stepping we often see in kata, when, for example, the defender turns to block and counter, placing him or herself at a 90-degree angle to the attacker, as we might see in the turn to the west in the second long sequence of Shisochin kata (fig. 2.40).<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Each of the *bunkai* sequences of Shisochin kata probably begins from a clinch position with both arms up, using the scissoring technique we see in the opening three moves of the kata—what look like nukite or *shotei* “punches”—as the initial “receiving” technique against one of the opponent's arms.

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**Figure 2-40** Stepping off line after the initial “scissoring” receiving technique in the second of the long sequences in Shisochin kata, leaving the defender in a 90-degree relationship to the attacker.

That seems like a rather long digression. I’m not sure what it has to do with deer standing quietly in the woods, not moving, unless it’s the notion that you probably won’t see much in the way of wasted movement when it comes to animals; they generally conserve their energy. We should too. Oh—that, and learning to move naturally.

# WINTER



*The woods are lovely, dark and deep ...*

—ROBERT FROST, “STOPPING BY WOODS ON A SNOWY EVENING”

## Patterns or Structure of Kata

Snow showers. I'm not even sure what that means, but they left a light, powdery coating of snow on everything. A dusting, they call it. The trail cuts a white meandering path through the woods, and even the rocks along the path catch the snow in places, like white shadows clinging to small indentations, protected for the moment from the winter sun or gusts of wind. It almost looks as though no one has been here for a while, no footprints to mark the trail and scuff up bits of leaves and dirt. I might be the only one who has passed this way, at least today, because, of course, it's a trail. Someone made it, carved it out of the forest, cut saplings and cleared brush.

I'm thinking metaphorically again, walking along the trail, mentally practicing kata, thinking about bunkai and imagining the other side, the side that's so hard to picture: the attacking side. This sort of metaphorical thinking reminds me of that book by Haruki Murakami, *What I Talk about When I Talk about Running*. Or that line from *Il Postino* where Mario asks Neruda, "You mean then that ... the whole world is the metaphor for something else?" And with an abashed look, Mario says, "I'm talking crap." And Neruda says, "No, not at all."

Someone made kata, these patterns of movement that we use to remember techniques of self-defense, that we use to learn the martial principles of the style. But the patterns are confusing and seemingly as haphazardly composed as a meandering trail heading off into the woods. No two trails exactly the same. No two kata alike in structure, conforming to the same rules one might use to decipher their patterns. And yet someone passed this way before, left marks, however faint, that would point the way, like trail markers, and explain how we might go about figuring out these seemingly arcane and esoteric movements.

Are they arcane and esoteric? Certainly they are part of a cultural milieu and time period when one might have needed to defend one's life, fighting to the death with lethal techniques, yet to us, in a way, as anachronistic as many of the techniques that seem to depend on one grabbing the topknot or



queue of one's attacker. But esoteric? The effectiveness of most techniques, arguably, is based largely on their simplicity, not their complexity or the difficulty one might have in learning them. The real difficulty lies mainly in trying to explain movements and techniques that we can only half see. With kata, we only see the defender's response to an attack. We can only imagine the other side, and this often influences how we interpret the techniques of kata.

And whoever created these kata certainly did not make it easy. If a single person put the techniques of these kata together—I'm thinking of the classical subjects of Goju-ryu from Saifa to Suparinpei—I would expect the patterns to be as uniform and predictable as the set of Pinan kata or the Gekisai kata of the twentieth century. But they're not. Seipai kata, for example, is largely asymmetrical—with at least the first three sequences not showing any repetition—using the left hand to “block” and the right hand for the initial attack (which is also true of the fourth sequence, though that sequence is repeated on the other side). Each of the first four sequences—there would seem to be five total sequences, though the fifth sequence shows a variation, in part, on the other side—is shown in its entirety; that is, with an initial receiving, a controlling or bridging technique, and a finishing technique. This is not the same pattern we see in Seiunchin, for example, which, aside from its set of three opening techniques in shiko dachi, repeats most of its techniques on both the right and left sides—that is, in response to a right or left attack—whereas Seipai only repeats the fourth sequence, though parts of the fifth sequence are repeated. But even in Seiunchin we have a pattern that is “interrupted,” where some of the sequences, unlike most of the sequences of Seipai, only show the final techniques tacked onto the second or final repetition. This is true of the opening sequence of moves, the high-low techniques in shiko dachi, and the “elbow” techniques—the first sequence, the third sequence, and the final sequence.



***Figure 3-1** Core receiving posture, after the completion of the initial scissor technique, from Sanseiru kata, when used with the stepping turn.*



*Figure 3-2 The application of the core receiving technique, whether it is used in response to an attacker's punch or clinch.*

Sanseiru kata, on the other hand, shows significant repetition in its middle section, repeating this “core” movement—chest “block,” kick, “elbow,” “punch,” kick series—three times, and using an opening sequence that is merely a variation of similar techniques. And Seisan is entirely different again, showing three variations of what is essentially the same bunkai pattern in the three sequences that follow the opening series of repetitive basic techniques—the three punches, three circular blocks, and three palm-up, palm-down techniques with knee kicks followed by a grab and kick.

There are so many structural variations, in fact, in just these four kata that it certainly seems to suggest different origins or sources, and it certainly adds to the difficulty one has in trying to understand the original applications of the different kata techniques. And yet, different kata structures do not change the basic martial principles involved, and these

principles are retained regardless of which kata one is looking at or which structure has been used to string together the techniques of the kata. In fact, one of the more interesting aspects of this structural awareness, “seeing the pattern” if you will, is perhaps a sort of radical realization that at least some aspects of the structure of any given kata are completely arbitrary.

This may seem heretical, or at the very least blasphemous to some, but it’s merely another way of seeing the sequences of a kata, another way of practicing kata bunkai. For example: if we take the first sequence of Seiunchin kata described above, we see that the first two opening shiko dachi techniques are incomplete, with the finishing technique only attached to the third repetition—this is the push forward with the “supported punch” and elbow attack. If we attach the finishing technique to the first of these steps into shiko dachi (same as the third) or the second of these (on the opposite side), we are not really altering the intent of the kata. We’re merely illustrating it in another way, completing the sequences that are only shown in part. We could do the same thing with the core double-arm receiving techniques of Sanseiru (fig. 3.2), attaching them to the open-hand bridging techniques (fig. 3.3) we find toward the end of the kata.



**Figure 3-3** *The bridging technique of the final sequence in Sanseiru kata. This comes off the core arm-bar technique shown in fig. 3.2 and is followed by the head-twisting “double punch.”*

Certainly what we would find is that the flow of kata that we have become accustomed to is interrupted, but the real intent of kata is to act as a repository for self-defense techniques, not necessarily to be practiced as a performance piece. In fact, the less we see kata as a performance piece for winning trophies at tournaments, the more we may begin to understand its patterns, its structure, and thereby its bunkai.

## Shu Ha Ri: The Stages of Training

守破離

*Shu*

*Ha*

*Ri*

On a cold Sunday afternoon in the early days of winter, I found myself in the woods, my scarf wrapped tightly around my neck and a wool hat pulled down over my ears, listening to Michael Wojtech, the author of *Bark: A Field Guide to Trees of the Northeast*, talk about tree bark—me and twenty-nine or thirty other people crazy enough to stand around in the woods as if we too were weathering this first blast of winter like the trees. The snow that had melted into pockets of slush the day before had refrozen overnight and the well-trodden boot tracks along the trails had become icy and treacherous, reminding me of trying to make my way along a rocky coastal beach covered with blankets of seaweed and algae. But this was winter and there was a steady north wind to serve as a reminder.

Mr. Wojtech, pointing out a white birch just off the trail, explained how trees breathe through their lenticels (how I understood it) or more properly how those dark horizontal striations on the surface allow for the exchange of gases between the inside of the tree and the outside air (though I would never describe my own respiration that way). He pointed out shagbark hickories and red maples and hemlocks and quaking aspens, and explained how the trees grew and how the bark functioned. It was really quite an interesting talk, despite the cold. It gave me a much better appreciation of trees but also a sort of fascination with their “aliveness.”

I don't know why this reminded me of the martial concepts of Shu, Ha, and Ri. Perhaps because I had been rereading a marvelous little book that morning, a collection of old essays by Kensho Furuya titled *Kodo: Ancient Ways: Lessons in the Spiritual Life of the Warrior/Martial Artist*. Furuya sensei talks of these stages in one's training using the image of an egg. In the first stage, the student "develops in the shell ... learning the form and technique." The teacher does his or her best to pass on the techniques of the style, and the student in turn does his or her best to preserve and protect what is being passed on.

In the second stage, the student "breaks out of his shell," mastering the techniques. In this stage, the student preserves the technique but also adapts the technique to fit his or her own movement and idiosyncrasies. The kata and execution of the techniques are fundamentally the same for both the student and the teacher, but there are also differences. Most of these are quite subtle, but they are nevertheless differences. In the first stage of training, it might be taken as a great compliment if someone were to observe the student and say that he or she looked exactly like the teacher performing kata. However, in this second stage of training, this might be an indication that the student hasn't really progressed—that the principles and lessons of kata have not fully been understood or ingested to become a natural part of the student's movement. The way my teacher used to put it, a somewhat cryptic pronouncement, certainly, but nevertheless telling, was that "first the student practices the kata, and then the kata practices the student."

The minute corrections a teacher might make in the first phase of a student's training don't matter as much in this stage because the student now understands the technique. The student now knows what the techniques are for and how to use them, but in order to make them work, there may be subtle differences from how the teacher executes the same techniques. This does not mean that there may not be a need to correct techniques here and there—there is always the danger that in adapting one's technique to one's own movement, the fundamental principles may be inadvertently ignored or subverted in one way or another. For example, as students get stronger or faster, they may find themselves unconsciously relying on strength or speed instead of technique. In some ways, I suppose, the analogy of the egg and the baby chick breaks down here—there may be

a need at times to revisit that earlier stage of learning to “check” one’s technique. Perhaps there is, in fact, a constant reminder to “check” one’s technique in the same way that Kosho Uchiyama Roshi reminds us to “Sit silently for ten years, then for ten more years, and then for another ten years.” I think there’s an important difference here; he didn’t just say that one should sit silently for thirty years.

And yet there is another stage: Ri. In this stage, the student has “left the nest.” The student has transcended the technique—that is, they are not consciously thinking about the form of the technique or applying the techniques; instead, they are relying on an intuitive understanding of the principles to guide their technique. The principles have been learned and absorbed through ruthless practice of the techniques. This understanding of the principles behind the formal movements is what guides this last stage of formal training. There are no shortcuts. But there are dangers here. You can’t just arrive at this stage because you want to, not without long hours of practice. And yet, as Dogen says of an understanding of Zen, you can’t get there unless there *is* a desire.

The other danger for me comes with how we understand the principles of kata. We may know the form of the techniques, but our understanding of the bunkai—how we are meant to apply the techniques—may be, at the very least, lacking or altogether wrong. How can we understand the principles of a martial system—and the principles are, of course, preserved in the kata—if we are simply guessing about the applications of the techniques? If we don’t understand the principles, there is no “Ri.” If we don’t practice the techniques with the right frame of mind, we won’t discover how the techniques are meant to be applied. And if we don’t discover the original bunkai, we won’t find the principles. And once again, no principles, no “Ri.”

I don’t think this really had anything to do with seeing a small bird’s nest on a branch up in a nearby oak tree. What I was really thinking about on that cold walk through the woods was how we can learn to understand the principles that seem to connect things—how trees, in all of their variety, live and breathe and work at survival; how they take in water and fight off insects; how they grow and adapt to different environments. It was all based on an understanding of the principles involved. The more trees you study, I



imagine, the more you see these principles manifested. And really, it all seemed so human.

Of course, I could be wrong about all of this. After all, I'm no authority on trees either—I just enjoy them. Perhaps there is no difference whether one is working with the “original intent” of kata and bunkai or practicing block-punch-kick bunkai derived from a less traditional approach to karate. With the right frame of mind, I suppose, one might still work through the stages of Shu, Ha, Ri. Though when all is said and done, I suspect that there is a significant difference for most of us between choosing the formal Japanese tea ceremony as one's path—Chado or the Way of Tea, for example—and serving up a burger and fries at a fast food restaurant, though Zen master Dogen, the author of *Instructions for the Cook*, may not have endorsed such a distinction, provided that you approached it with the right frame of mind, that is.

## It's the Clothes, You Know

We actually had snow a week or so ago, five or six inches. That's more than we had all last winter. I couldn't resist heading out into the woods for a walk just to see what it would all look like, frozen and cold. But in my rush to get in a bit of a hike before the sun set and the coyotes and goblins came out, I forgot to change out of my old Chippewa boots. They were all oiled up for the winter, so I wasn't worried about getting my feet wet, but the soles are pretty smooth, and I was a little worried about how slippery the hill trails might be. Generally I subscribe to the notion that there's no such thing as bad weather; there's just the wrong clothes for the occasion. And these were really the wrong boots for walking on slippery winter trails.



*Figure 3-4 The shrine wall in the author's barn dojo.*

Of course, if I weren't walking in the woods, I'd be training in an unheated barn, dressed about the same this time of year. Essentially, we train outdoors under a roof. We dress for it in the winter—knit ski hats, polar fleece vests, wool shirts and socks, warm shoes and gloves. It's out of necessity more than anything else. In the winter, the thermometer in the barn can often hit 18 degrees Fahrenheit (–9 degrees Celsius), so we've generally dispensed with the traditional karate gi. But as I carefully made my way up the snow-covered trails, I found myself thinking about the clothes we wear and some of the rituals we engage in when we practice martial arts.

And it seems to me that all of these rituals—the clothes we wear, the language and terms we use, the ceremonies and titles—tend to invest martial arts practice with mystery and a sort of quasi-religious feeling. I wonder whether the Okinawans themselves view the practice of martial arts the same way that Westerners do? I mean, when we count to ten or use various Japanese terms to describe techniques, we learn these words almost as if it is a rite of initiation—we become members of a select group. I understand that for some the use of Japanese (or in some cases Okinawan) terms is done in the spirit of respect, an acknowledgment of the role Okinawa has played in the preservation of karate. But there are some people who write about martial arts in such a way that even after more than forty years of practice I have no idea what they are saying—they use so many Japanese terms mixed in with their English explanations that it almost seems like some encrypted language. Some seem more interested in using Japanese terms merely to impress their readers, particularly since many of the terms used to describe karate techniques are not universally recognized, often only used within a specific school.

The rituals and traditions that identify us as members of a select group might be said to be true of the karate gi as well. Certainly one could say that these pajama-like clothes are comfortable and loose and durable, but seriously, couldn't one also train in sweatpants? The interesting thing about the karate gi, at least the top, is that it seems to be constructed very much like the kimono. So again, I wonder how Okinawans felt putting on a gi to practice karate some seventy-five or a hundred years ago? I don't think it would have felt "special" in quite the same way as it does to a Westerner. In fact, I've seen everyday Okinawans dressed in clothes of a similar design

made out of very lightweight cotton fabrics—loose wraparound tops that tied at the side worn with loose-fitting trousers that were cut off a little below the knee.



I've trained in Okinawan dojos alongside Okinawans, but I wondered sometimes whether the experience was the same for me and the other Americans as it was for my Okinawan friends. We don't usually wear *geta* or *zori*, so going barefoot inside isn't quite as natural for us. Is practicing karate in bare feet, then, another sort of ritualized behavior? After all, most of us in North America are not practicing in a tropical climate.

There is a strong argument, of course, that we pay homage to Okinawa and the source of our karate by adopting the clothing, the language, and the rituals. I think there's certainly something to be said for honoring our forebears or preserving the traditions and acknowledging our roots, but how does it affect what we do? Do the clothes make the man, as they say, or do the clothes make a person's experience something other than it is? Would we be practicing the same martial art if we were wearing shoes and sweatpants, counting and giving commands in our native language, and, heavens, at all cost, avoiding bowing to the shrine? Would it change

anything if the commands were, “Ready? Form 13. Begin”? Or form 18 or 36 or 108?

I guess what I really wonder is, how does the adoption of all these essentially Japanese things affect the way we view our martial arts? Don’t get me wrong; I loved learning all the esoterica—from how to fold a *gi* properly to all the correct terms for things as simple as standing with the feet shoulder-width apart to the etiquette of titles and bowing. But how does all of this—fairly familiar routines for an Okinawan—affect someone who is not from Japan or Okinawa? It seems to me that some of this at least has nothing whatsoever to do with learning a martial art, and in fact may get in the way of the strictly martial aspect of the art. I think in some ways it can be distracting, putting an emphasis on style over substance.

It may be just another by-product of our modern culture. We dress in certain ways in order to identify with an activity. I know this is probably overstating the case—certainly there are advantages to wearing a good pair of running shoes or good tech wear when hiking—but at times it seems as though it’s almost as if we do this to broadcast this identity to everyone else. If we bike, we find ways to spend a small fortune on biking clothes, as if we are convinced that we need to dress and look the part in order to engage in the activity. And the same is true of almost any athletic activity you care to name. There are special sneakers or shoes for each activity—whether it’s running or weightlifting or soccer or cross-training or T’ai Chi or even just plain walking. Gone are the days of a good pair of canvas Keds or Converse All-Stars for all occasions. And we have special clothing to go along with the shoes. And of course, there is a special language to learn as well. All sort of weird, when you think about it, especially in the martial arts.

# That's What We Call Y'ur Basic Basics

I was out snowshoeing the other day. The snow wasn't particularly deep—I think there was six or eight inches on the wooded trails—but the snowshoes made it much less of a slog. Part way up the trail I ran into an old New Englander walking his two dogs, and since the dogs were running free and charging down the trail at me, I stopped to say hello to both the dogs and their owner. And, as often happens, it seems, when you stop to talk off in the woods, one thing led to another, and before you know it I'm getting an introduction to the trees of New England, some of which I knew already, but a friendly refresher course and a neighborly visit is always pleasant.

"That there is your basic hemlock," he said, pointing ahead to a large tree by the side of the trail. There were, in fact, a number of hemlocks, a small grove, and I wondered which would serve as the best example of a "basic" hemlock. "And that over there," he went on, "is your basic black birch. And most of those down yonder are your basic quakin' aspens." By this time, though, the dogs were off down the trail, and he decided he'd better amble after them, and I set off in the opposite direction.

I walked the first two-mile loop and then, feeling energetic, I set off to run the second loop. But what I found myself thinking about was your "basic" tree. Now I know his use of the word *basic* was just a manner of speaking, but it got me to thinking about a video I had seen a few days before. The video lasted about ten minutes. There were four old men (I feel as though I can say that, being one of that older group myself) in *gi* and black belts doing basics. They did twenty counts each of sweeping kicks, front kicks, short punches, single forearm blocks, double forearm blocks, and chest punches, over a hundred of those, and then more double punches. The video was labeled *Basic Training*. And that's what got me to wondering. Why is *this* basic training? That is, why focus on such elementary techniques—most of this training consisted of blocks, punches, and kicks—as if they were fundamental or, if you will, foundational?



**Figure 3-5** *Your basic Goju block as we see it in Shisochin kata.*



**Figure 3-6** *Shisochin kata technique that utilizes the basic block with a 90-degree turn.*

Admittedly, this was Shorin-ryu training, which I know next to nothing about, but it wasn't so very far from what we would see in any other dojo training any other style of karate, including traditional Goju-ryu. And maybe that's the problem: Shouldn't the practice of basics train one for what is fundamental to the system or the style? That is, if the essence of a martial system like Goju-ryu is contained within the classical or koryu kata—fairly obvious, I think, since Miyagi Chojun sensei seemed to suggest that the classical kata were the only things sacrosanct in the system (witness his statements at the 1936 meeting of karate masters sponsored by the Ryukyu Shinpo newspapers)<sup>1</sup>—shouldn't the “basics” reflect the tenor of the classical kata? Why not take basics straight from the classical subjects and practice those instead of these generic basics we so often see at the start of any karate class? For each class, one could select a different technique, one from each of the classical kata, for instance, and repeat it ten or twenty times, with the added benefit that students would be practicing the



technique on both sides, left and right. When we generally move to that part of class focused on classical kata, we do each one once or twice. That means some techniques, since there are many single techniques in the classical subjects, may be practiced once or twice in class. Multiply that by the number of times a student trains the kata and see how long it takes to get to ten thousand, that magic number of mastery in any physical activity, according to the journalist Malcolm Gladwell.

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<sup>1</sup> Patrick McCarthy and Yuriko McCarthy, *Ancient Okinawan Martial Arts, Volume 2: Koryu Uchinadi* (Boston: Tuttle, 1999), 65.

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The longer I live, the more language seems to befuddle me. I'm not at all sure I know what basics or *kihon waza* are. The jodan uke we see practiced so diligently doesn't occur in the classical kata of Goju-ryu. Of course, we see it in the Gekisai kata, but those are certainly more generic karate kata, "school-boy kata" as they are sometimes called, and of fairly recent vintage, so how is that fundamental or basic to the practice of Goju-ryu? And when you really begin to look at the classical subjects, there aren't that many straight punches either—certainly not the preponderance of straight punches that their seemingly endless practice in basics would warrant. And why that particular chest block? And the down block? Does it change how we practice basics if we find that the down block is always used as an attack to the opponent's neck in the classical subjects of Goju-ryu? And there are probably more knee kicks in the classical kata than kicks with the foot.



**Figure 3-7** Your basic knee kick from Seisan kata—the technique that finishes two of the three sequences of the kata and may or may not be accompanied with a down side kick.

So why does this sort of basic training still persist? When I first started training, we would practice these same basic punches and blocks hundreds of times each class. We often counted around the dojo for each basic: sixty students counting to ten for each blocking or punching or kicking technique. We got very good at these “basic” blocks, punches, and kicks. And there is certainly something to be said for developing a good stance and foundation or good body mechanics. But why the emphasis on those particular techniques—techniques that one finds in Gekisai Dai Ichi, even if one has been training for five, ten, or twenty years? Is that the essence of Goju-ryu, or for that matter any other style of karate? Are there fundamental lessons to be learned here, even though the techniques themselves have very little to do with the classical subjects? If these basic blocks and punches constitute so much of one’s training, won’t that affect how one sees kata and bunkai? Won’t a student’s interpretation of kata

simply be a reflection of his or her training? That is, if it's all block, punch, kick, that may be all one sees in kata. Is there such a thing as a basic karate kata (and here I'm asking about only the classical subjects)? What would it even mean if someone sitting at a traditional *embukai* were to lean over toward his neighbor and say, "That there is y'ur basic karate kata"?

## Picture This ...



*Figure 3-8 Winter at Fitzgerald Lake.*

I was off crunching through the ice and snow the other day—the only sound in a forest filled with creatures hidden in the hemlocks along the shore, watching me, no doubt. The lake itself was frozen. A mist drifted over the surface. The cattails, thick along the bank, stood quietly by, hoping for the wind to come and catch the seeds up and drop them someplace farther down the shore. Even the trees were sleeping, I think, waiting out the winter.

I took a picture of it because it was so atmospheric, so filled with a sense of expectation. Or was it mystery? Across the lake you could hear a distant blue jay (or was it a raven?), complaining, no doubt, about the cold. But who knows? Sometimes pictures seem to be less a record of fact, recording

an objective reality, and more like an invitation for speculation and interpretation.



*Figure 3-9 The “hands up” posture from Kururunfa kata.*

I was thinking about that over lunch a little later in the day—recollection in tranquility, as Wordsworth says—when I came across an internet post on Kururunfa. The writer was adamant—I’m sure as convinced of his own rectitude as I must seem to some people—about his interpretation of what he called the “hands up” move in Kururunfa (fig. 3.9). It’s the technique that comes *after* the position that always reminds me of Da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*—feet out, legs straight, arms held out to the side at shoulder’s height. It doesn’t really matter what his bunkai or interpretation was (I don’t subscribe to the conventional view that it’s an escape from a full nelson, which is all he was suggesting); what I find interesting is how he arrived at it.

He based his interpretation on three points, and I’m quoting:

1. “Obviously the technique begins with the hands up movement.”
2. “Obviously the opponent is in front of us ... we do not volunteer to be kicked in the [groin].”
3. “The hand movement is symmetrical ... which means ... the opponent is not coming from one side [and] the attack is two-handed, symmetrical as well.”

The problem, of course, is that if the first point is not correct—“obviously” or not, it’s an assumption—then none of the other points really matter. And, of course, I would adamantly argue that the first point is *not* correct. I would argue that the technique begins somewhat earlier, after the last finishing technique of the previous sequence, which is the mawashi (or tora guchi) in Cat Stance. Why? The short answer is because the mawashi in Cat Stance is always a finishing neck break in the classical subjects.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is the easiest way to look at this sequence. If we were to make a more nuanced argument based on the structure of Kururunfa, the initial technique (the uke) for each of the sequences of the kata is more probably one of the paired opening moves.

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And if this is indeed the case, then the initial move or receiving technique of this sequence is the technique that begins by pivoting to the west with the left palm-up chudan block (fig. 3.10). Both hands are open and one is moving into sanchin dachi. But this position, like so many other “picturesque” postures we see in training manuals, is not held. Rather, we move through this position to the next posture, a Front Stance facing east, with what looks like a right elbow attack to the opponent’s ribs. The left hand has rotated with the turning of the body to grab the attacker’s left arm. Then, moving forward, the right forearm comes up to put pressure on the opponent’s elbow, pushing him forward.

This initial block, grab, and elbow attack is repeated on the other side of the kata, this time working against the opponent’s right arm. Then, stepping around to the front of the kata (facing north), the left arm comes over the attacker’s head and around the neck. In separating the hands—the left hand pulling on the chin and the right on the top of the head—and bringing the arms out to either side, the opponent’s head is twisted. Then, as the arms are brought into the “hands up” position and quickly thrust down, the attacker is thrown over the left hip and attacked on the ground (fig. 3.11).



**Figure 3-10** *The more likely beginning of the sequence, though one could certainly argue that at least thematically, and structurally, each sequence may in fact begin with one of the first two techniques of the kata.*



*Figure 3-11 The end of the sequence.*

Another way of looking at this—though neither of these is a response to a full nelson—is to see this “initial block, grab, and elbow attack” as an alternative, tacked onto the initial receiving technique—one of the two Cat Stance techniques that begin the kata (see “When a Tree Falls in the Forest and Other Thoughts on Bunkai,” fig. 1.29). In this case, after the first technique in a right-foot-forward Cat Stance, the left forearm is brought up (fig. 3.12) along the outside of the opponent’s neck (the attacker’s left side), and then pivoting to the west, the sequence continues with the throw and neck break described above. However, what we see in this scenario is that the elbow attack to the ribs, coupled with the step forward into Basic Stance, may more probably be another head-twisting technique, similar to what we see in the final sequence of Saifa kata. While the left hand grabs the top of the opponent’s head, the defender’s right hand reaches under for the chin—this pulling back motion is what is described as an elbow to the



opponent's ribs—and then, stepping forward, the chin is brought up and out, twisting the head.



**Figure 3-12** This controlling technique is one of the pivotal techniques found in both Kururunfa kata and Suparinpei kata. It is generally used after an initial entry technique, moving in at an angle or using the rotation of the body.

That's a brief description of two possible ways of looking at this sequence in Kururunfa. In all fairness, it's not, I suppose, that easy to see. But the real problem is how we so often approach the interpretation of kata movement: that is, as if it's a still photograph in some instructional manual, as if the movements are disconnected, having nothing to do with what comes before or after any particular move, as if it's frozen in time, like a lake in winter, conjuring up all sorts of fantastic ideas. Karate is a movement art; it's dynamic. The classical kata of Goju-ryu are all composed of bunkai sequences. The sequences may be interrupted, depending on the structure of an individual kata, but they are all composed of initial entry techniques, bridging or controlling techniques, and finishing

techniques that generally end the confrontation either with a lethal attack to the head or neck of the opponent or one that puts them on the ground. I can't repeat this enough.

The first step should always be to identify the entry and finishing techniques. The next step is to make sure it is realistic and that ultimately the techniques would end the confrontation. And lastly, any interpretation should be faithful to and preserve the movements of the kata. In this "hands up" technique from Kururunfa, then, with all of that in mind, it shouldn't be too difficult to come up with a bunkai that replicates the movements of kata, keeps it realistic (that is, doesn't allow the attacker a second attack), and puts the attacker on the ground. But you have to begin with the right entry technique. After all, still pictures don't tell the whole story.

## Rhythm and Timing

Deep into winter, the weather has suddenly turned—a few days of above average temperatures—and I find myself thinking about fall and the changing seasons. The snow has melted, mostly, and out on the trails it looks as if it might be early spring or late autumn. No foliage, of course, but the leaves covering the forest floor make it look like another season, one not quite so still, as if the forest is holding its breath, everything waiting for the next nor'easter. Of course, winter will come back, but not today.

Today, I can wander up familiar trails, with no ice pack to hinder my way or boggy mud-covered patches to look out for. And, as I often do, I turn onto the Pines Edge Trail off the Boggy Meadow Road that leads up to a trail called the Middle Path. Very Zen. Though I suspect the name really came from the fact that the trail runs all the way up the middle of the Fitzgerald Lake Conservation Area. It's actually one of my favorite trails here, not because of the name but because it's so varied. It passes through swampy areas and up over rocky hills, through stands of mountain laurel, and down through woods of pine and hemlock. I've encountered a large pileated woodpecker here, ducks, tree frogs, water snakes, and a host of squirrels and chipmunks scurrying over the leaves and peering out from hollow tree trunks.

A few months ago I passed a large bald-faced hornet's nest hanging from a small sapling by the side of the trail. It looked like a giant Halloween mask. The hornets (*Dolichovespula maculata*) were hard at work, carefully building the paper walls, spiraling outward, making it larger and larger. One could marvel at the effort—each one working for a few minutes before returning through one of the openings as another came out to continue the work. But I wondered who was overseeing this monumental undertaking. Was there a structural engineer? Did the hornets understand the dynamics of the situation, the stresses involved? What would happen in a torrential rainstorm? The nest already looked too big for the sapling where it hung.

When I returned a week later, most of the nest lay on the ground. Only a few small scraps of the papery nest still clung to the sapling. And the

hornets were nowhere to be seen.

I don't know whether it's a romanticized notion of the natural world or not, but I tend to think that a tree knows innately what it needs to do in order to survive. That birds don't need to be taught where to get their food. Squirrels seem to know they need to amass enough nuts to make it through the hard winter months when the ground is covered with a foot of snow. Some people even think that the woolly bear caterpillar can predict how harsh the winter will be with its arrangement of black and brown stripes. I don't know: did some errant child take a stick to the hornet's nest, or did the hornets simply make a mistake, a miscalculation?

I was thinking of all this because it speaks to a kind of awareness of things, all things, that there's a rhythm to life, something like the seasons we experience in the world. And if you're not aware of it, it can get you into all sorts of trouble, or at the very least throw a monkey wrench into your plans.

I was listening to an interview of Charlie Gabriel, the jazz clarinetist, on the radio the other night. He also occasionally sings, and they played a version of him singing "I'm gonna sit right down and write myself a letter." What struck me was his phrasing, his rhythm and timing. All the best jazz singers seem to have this incredible sense of timing, an awareness of the music and the other musicians they're playing with. Listening to Charlie Gabriel, it struck me that so much of life has to do with this sense of rhythm and timing. If you watch a game of soccer (*fútbol*), you can sometimes, if the team is playing well, get a sense of the rhythm of the game. When you drive down the highway in heavy traffic, there's a rhythm to the flow. There's a rhythm to the words in a sentence, and a rhythm and flow to walking down the street on a crowded sidewalk.

There's a rhythm to karate as well. And if you don't have the rhythm right, or the timing, you're dead. You can watch kata sometimes and see lifeless, stagnant places, places where there's no flow. But you really notice it in doing bunkai with a partner or ippon kumite or yakusoku kumite. When you do it correctly, you meet the opponent in a sort of synthesis of movement, as if you are both a part of the same movement, just a movement that's a bit more complex than either of you would employ separately. There's no gap or dead space waiting to be filled, there's no

starting and stopping. When it's right, it looks as if it's natural, as if it's the way it's supposed to be. The counterattack follows, without effort, in the wake of the block. The block begins almost as soon as the opponent's attack, and meets it before the attack has finished, so that the energy of the opponent's attack is dispelled and redirected. It doesn't wait, with the attacker holding his or her arm out in the air, suspended like a conductor's baton, pausing dramatically as the orchestra readies itself.

When we train applications together with a partner, we might try to disrupt the rhythm of our partner's block and counter by attacking faster, not telegraphing our attack in any way, as they say, but that's the beauty of it. The rhythm and timing is still there, or at least it should be.



*Figure 3-13 Ichi go ichi e.*

I don't really know how to describe this in words that don't make it all sound so needlessly cryptic and esoteric. It's just simply that there is a rhythm to both kata and bunkai that's important to be aware of. It reminds

me of something that Toyama Zenshu sensei told me once many years ago in Okinawa. He was holding a piece of rice paper with Japanese calligraphy on it. It was a beautiful example of the art of Shodo. But then he turned it over—and of course you could still see the whole character quite clearly from the other side of the rice paper—just like kata, he said. Of course, that's a bit cryptic too, I suppose. It also reminds me of something Sifu Liu Chang I once said, how it takes two people to learn kung fu.

# Conventions

Welcome to a new year—January 1—and yet off in the woods the new year looks pretty much like the old one did a few days ago. The blue jays are scolding me as I trudge by on the trail, and the squirrels pause to look up and jump behind a tree, waiting to see if I’m a threat. I’ve read that squirrels are very territorial, so I suppose these are the same squirrels that were scurrying around last week, digging up acorns that they had buried last fall. I wonder whether squirrels are really as busy as they seem to be or whether they might be a bit like office workers rearranging the papers on their desks into neater piles, just looking busy in case the boss comes by or their mates ask where they’ve been all day.

But the days are already getting longer—we’re past the winter solstice. We’ve turned another page on the calendar. And yet all of this business of time and calendars is a human construct, isn’t it? Of course, the seasons are real, but the rest of it is just a mass delusion, or if not a delusion, at least something that we all culturally have come to agree on; that is, there’s little rhyme or reason to any of it, it’s just accepted. I mean, we’ve had lunar calendars and solar calendars and some combination of the two. Not even the seven-day week is anything but arbitrary, something we have just come to agree on. In fact, for a good deal of human history we haven’t even agreed on a twenty-four-hour day. Daniel Boorstin’s book *The Discoverers* has an interesting section on all of this. Way back in 1582, they took ten days out to correct the old Julian calendar, which was off by eleven minutes and fourteen seconds each year, so really, I’m not even sure of the date. And in America, we didn’t even accept this restructuring until colonial times.

Anyway, all of this got me thinking about what we accept as a society, what we take for granted as we carry on with our daily lives. Actually, I was thinking about all of this because I had been reading Kazuo Ishiguro’s book *The Buried Giant*. He describes a medieval England where strangers are feared and the forests are filled with ogres, and mists shroud the land and bring an eerie forgetfulness. And it’s all accepted as perfectly natural.



It made me wonder about all the things we accept in karate without question, all supported and bolstered by the bulwark of convention or lineage or rank. Of course, we practice all sorts of harmless conventions in the martial arts, from the karate gi to the formalities of seiza, and bowing to the shrine and pictures of those teachers who have preceded us, to the use of Japanese terminology and the practice of kata. But we also practice what I can only call conventional interpretations of kata technique. And these conventional interpretations get passed on with very little questioning of their practicality, as if we are hesitant to question anything that most everyone else seems to be doing.



*Figure 3-14 First technique of Saifa kata.*

And these problematic interpretations are everywhere in Goju-ryu. For example: The opening technique of Saifa, students are often taught, uses both hands to pull away from an attacker's wrist grab (fig. 3.14). But why disconnect from the attacker? Most students are taught that the opening technique of Seiunchin uses both hands to release the opponent's choke

hold. Yet why would you step toward someone who was choking you? (See “Ah, He’s Just Old. What Does He Know Anyway?,” page 189.) The opening technique of Sanseiru (after the three slow punches) is shown as a block of an opponent’s kick and then a grab of the kicking foot. But why would you lean forward with your head undefended and even attempt to grab a kick? (See “Things Aren’t Always What They Seem,” page 106.) The first technique of Seipai (fig. 3.15) is often demonstrated as a spear hand or finger strike to the opponent’s chest, but why would you attack a hard target with the fingertips? Sometimes the first and second techniques of Seipai are shown together as an elaborate wrist-grab release. But why would you take the time to weave your hands in and out of the attacker’s arms? And while we’re on the subject, is the final technique of Seipai a hammer fist strike, used to box the opponent’s ears, or is it a shuto to the neck after grabbing the attacker’s hair with the other hand, a much more lethal technique?



*Figure 3-15 First technique of Seipai kata.*

These are all *conventional* interpretations of kata techniques. The problem is they don't make a lot of sense for a variety of reasons: they are too slow, or they leave the defender open to attack, or they don't really follow kata, or they are easily thwarted by the opponent. Their only reason for being is that they are the conventional interpretations, and conventions are rarely questioned.

This is not to suggest that all conventions are useless or without merit. Clocks and calendars are very useful even if they are a somewhat arbitrary means of marking time. But conventional wisdom once suggested that the earth was flat, that there was witchcraft at work in Salem, that you'd catch your death if you walked around with wet feet.

Most of the conventional interpretations of kata, I think, are, at most, useful in pointing out some of the pitfalls one may encounter with interpretations of kata, as ironic as that may be. And by example, they can steer us off into better directions, bushwhacking through the woods in search of a better trail.

# Imagine That

In the midst of January. A week ago we had a foot of snow. Before that we had frigid arctic air that sat over the East Coast for two weeks. The early morning temperatures were running from 5 degrees above zero to 5 degrees below zero, and the daytime temperatures often didn't get above 12 degrees. And today it's 55 and raining, though not very hard. But in the woods, the rain is dripping off the branches and the snow on the trails has turned to slush. Off the trails, the snow is covered with white pine needles, birch tree catkins, errant late oak leaves, and small twigs and cones of eastern hemlock. Actually, I suppose, if you look closely enough there are probably pieces of shagbark hickory, long strips of paper birch, and the odd round ball-like fruit from the sycamore, everything scattered over the ground like a flat map of the forest. But the wildlife is hiding in the woods today—the mist has settled in and half obscured the trail. The only sounds I hear are from the occasional bird I seem to surprise as I alternately crunch and splash my way up the trail, and, of course, the constant sound of the rain dripping through the trees, catching for a moment on the branches and then falling to the ground. It will all change overnight, no doubt, as the forecast is calling for freezing rain and then the temperatures dropping once again into the 20s.

But looking at the trees in the distance, only half visible in the mist, reminds me that there are also things in kata that we may only half see, particularly since we are only seeing what happens on one side of the kata, the defending side.

We've probably all heard the stories. It's part of legend. I heard it from my teacher, and I'm sure he heard it from his. Japanese samurai swords, *katana*, were "tested on the bodies of convicted criminals as part of the practice of *tameshigiri*, or test cutting. One Japanese sword made in 1662 is inscribed "Two persons completely cut into two pieces (one stroke)," a scholarly article informs us, and reportedly blades bearing five-body ratings can be found in Japanese museums ([www.straightdope.com](http://www.straightdope.com)).

After all, how would you know you had a good blade unless you actually tested it, unless you actually asked it to do what it was expected to do under the duress of battle, what it was made to do? Was it balanced? How did it feel to actually wield? Would it withstand a cut against muscle and bone and sinew without breaking or chipping? Disturbing to consider, perhaps, but these were no doubt very real questions at one time.



**Figure 3-16** Head twists in Seipai are often too dangerous to practice safely. This technique, flipping the attacker over while twisting the head, ends the last sequence of the kata, finishing with a knee kick and left shuto to the neck.

The same questions arise when we consider the unarmed martial arts, though I'm not remotely suggesting that *karate-ka* hang out at the local bar and wait for a fight to break out. Or go sauntering through notoriously rough parts of the city in the late-night hours in order to test their martial skills, though I have heard some people say they have done just that. It's also no secret that there are a lot of idiots out there.

No, what I'm suggesting is that it is very difficult to analyze kata without *imagining* what is going on. This is the problem with the continuous bunkai of training subjects created by Toguchi sensei (Gekisai, Gekiha, and Kakuha) that one sees in some dojos, or the continuous two-person sets that utilize the classical kata one sees practiced in many other dojos.



*Figure 3-17 This head twist from Seiunchin kata seems safer to practice if it's done slowly.*

They are useful subjects for teaching timing and distancing, and perhaps a number of other things about martial movement. However, they are not very good at introducing some of the concepts and techniques that are necessary to understand the applications of the classical kata. In both cases, there is no opportunity to see what the reaction of the other person is. Every technique is blocked or parried or countered in such a way as to frustrate the application of the next technique, particularly the finishing techniques that are shown in the classical kata. Consequently, one applying this sort of analysis to the kata cannot really see what *are* finishing techniques. And one can't separate entry techniques from controlling or finishing techniques.

All of the techniques of kata, in this scenario, seem pretty much the same. It's fun to look at, and it may even be fun to train, but it doesn't seem to me to do a very good job of explaining kata and bunkai.

So what's missing? As strange as it sounds, I would suggest that what's needed is an imagined reality. Perhaps that's what T. T. Liang had in mind when he titled his book on T'ai Chi *Imagination Becomes Reality*, though I think he was really talking more about *chi* and the mind. Nevertheless it's a wonderful phrase. I've encountered the same problem. Unless I can get my training partner to react to my technique, even though I can't actually hit him, then I may miss how a particular technique in kata is meant to be applied. At the very least, I won't understand the speed or the rhythm of the kata techniques and how in application those may differ from how they are taught in kata, where they need to be done slower, with more articulation or punctuation, in order to learn them. After all, we have to teach kata step-by-step, almost in slow motion, if you will. Bunkai should exactly follow kata, but the speed and the rhythm may differ greatly. You have to imagine the effect of the entry technique on your opponent or training partner—not to mention the bridging or controlling techniques—to understand the techniques that follow it. Where does the entry technique put the opponent? Has the opponent's position changed relative to the defender? For example, what effect does a shuto to the neck have on the opponent? What effect does a kick to the side of the opponent's knee have? If the knee kick is effective, how has it turned the opponent? How does this turn facilitate the next move that we see in kata? If we can't imagine these things, or if our training partner cannot react in a realistic manner, then we may have a hard time discovering bunkai and, in the long run, understanding kata.

It's difficult to imagine a reaction without actually testing things out. And the problem with testing the reality of techniques should be obvious; some of the techniques are too dangerous. How do you train a neck break? I wanted to see how a particular bunkai worked—how it actually felt and whether or not it seemed realistic—that is, whether it “worked”—and had Bill, my training partner, try it on me.



**Figure 3-18** This is one of the head-twisting techniques from Shisochin kata. The left hand is on the opponent's head as the right hand is brought up into the chin, twisting the neck. In the Shodokan version of the kata, the second of these elbow techniques is followed by a turning throw, bringing the opponent's head down on the knee of the defender's Front Stance.

This was a head-twisting technique and throw from Shisochin kata. At first, Bill did it relatively slowly and easily. But that didn't seem to me enough to give me a sense of how "real" the technique was or how effective it was. So I asked him to "take it easy" but go a little faster and with just a bit more forcefulness. My job as attacker was to see if I could frustrate the technique or make it any more difficult to apply. Needless to say, we discovered that the technique worked just fine ... and I was in physical therapy for three months with a neck that I couldn't turn enough to even peripherally see behind me. The funny thing was that I didn't remember we had been training this rather dangerous neck twist and throw for most of the three months I visited the physical therapist. Probably because she never asked.



Still, lacking any convicted criminals, I think using the imagination is probably a better way to go, especially when we're talking not about kicks and punches but about attacking the head and neck—real Goju. It may be difficult to see, but with a little imagination all sorts of ideas may appear through the fog.

# Watching Kata

It's February—winter's cruelest month, or so T. S. Eliot may have thought until Ezra Pound got hold of an early draft of Eliot's "The Waste Land" and did a bit of editing. I always think of that after a brief January thaw, one like we had this year, and then it's followed in quick order with a bone-chilling north wind and winter sets in once again, not a whisper of any respite until April.

But today it almost seems as though spring could be just around the corner. The snow has mostly melted and the ground is damp. You can hear squirrels chattering and occasionally the deep-throated *kra-a-a* of a raven as it flies overhead. For the most part, though, the world here in the woods is still asleep. Not that I ever see many of the inhabitants; I probably make too much noise to surprise them. Oh, there's a woodpecker tapping away in the distance and the gnawed trunk of a few trees down by the swamp, evidence of beavers, even though there is no sign of a house or a dam. But I've actually seen more wildlife, more of wild nature, I think, out back by the dojo than off in the woods. I don't know why that is, since it's only a half-mile walk through the neighborhood to the center of town. But twice we've had moose wander down our driveway in the early morning hours and then sidle off through the cornfields. A couple of years in a row we had a family of black bears go after the bird feeders. They would just sit in the grass and gorge themselves on sunflower seeds. Foxes have snuck by furtively looking for mice or house cats that may be sitting out on the back step. And once I had a Cooper's hawk fly into the dojo. He spent the better part of the day there, unable to figure out how to get out again, even though I opened all of the doors.

I don't know why I was thinking of all this except that it was about this same time of year that I first met Kimo Wall sensei. There was a small ad in the university newspaper, *The Daily Collegian*. It said something about a traditional martial arts weapons class being offered at the university and gave a time and a room number for the first meeting. The teacher was someone named Kimo. I suppose it was one of those fortuitous occasions, sort of like that old martial saying that when the student is ready, the teacher

will appear. I could have ditched the whole idea and gone off for a leisurely walk in the woods, but I didn't. Instead, a friend and I drove over to the university, sauntered into an ordinary college classroom, and shook hands with a man in a sports jacket who introduced himself as "Kimo."



*Figure 3-19 Training kobudo in Okinawa with Matayoshi sensei and students from the University of Massachusetts.*

When I first started training Goju with Kimo sensei, we trained in a fairly large room at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. The room was probably twenty or twenty-five feet deep and thirty or forty feet long—plenty of space—though there were often fifty or sixty of us lined up for training. The space was fine for warm-ups and basics—we would generally line up one arm's length apart side to side, and a little more than the distance of a front kick front to back—but it was a little tight if we were doing kata, particularly classical subjects. So we often took turns training. For example, students would divide into two groups; half the group would do a kata while the other half sat on the side and watched, and then the other half would do the same kata while the first group watched.

This was often the way people trained in Okinawa, Kimo sensei explained, because the dojos were generally much smaller than they are in America. But the real point, he said, was so that each person could watch and learn, not just from one's seniors but also from one's juniors. The idea was to have an opportunity to check oneself. If one saw a mistake in someone's kata—perhaps the elbow hadn't been kept down or the shoulders were raised or tense—one was supposed to use that opportunity to check one's own technique. It was the teacher's job to correct the student, but it was each student's job to correct him- or herself. This was, in fact, the way Kimo sensei taught; I never heard him correct an individual student's mistakes in front of the class. He would always comment to the whole class. "Check your feet." "Don't forget to breathe." "Elbows down," he would say, even if he had noticed only one person making the mistake. And I would always check myself to see if he was talking about me, and assumed that everyone else did as well.



*Figure 3-20 Doing Sanchin in Gibo sensei's dojo in the 1980s.*

When we sat and observed kata, Sensei said, “first watch the feet, then the eyes, and then the hands.” Well, I thought, that’s pretty clear, but what am I watching for? Are we only watching for mistakes? If we already know the kata, what can we learn from watching someone else do it, aside from making sure that we didn’t make the same mistakes ourselves when it was our turn? I suppose, in some cases, nothing. If all we’re looking for is mistakes, and we don’t see any, then there’s nothing to learn here. But perhaps it’s not really the movements themselves as much as the movement—how someone moves.

There’s a video I used to watch of a guy doing T’ai Chi saber form. His movement was so incredibly natural and fluid that it was hard to tell where one technique finished and the next one began. You couldn’t really see his intent or the moment when the muscles required for one movement gave way to the muscles required for the next movement. In some way it reminded me of something Picasso had reportedly said about painting, something to the effect of, “It took me four years to learn to paint like Raphael but a lifetime to draw like a child.”



*Figure 3-21 Practicing sanchin dachi and stepping with the nigiri-game.*

And yet natural movement, for lack of a better term, often seems to fly in the face of what we are led to believe is “good kata” from videos of winning tournament performances. What we usually see is kata performed with exaggeratedly large arm movements, techniques done with excessive dynamic tension, movements that are so fast that the use of the whole body is sacrificed, movements that are so slow that the functionality of the technique has disappeared entirely, and positions that are held (and seemingly admired) for so long that whatever practical use they may have had—particularly in relationship to the techniques that precede them and the ones that follow them—is forgotten. In fact, we seem to be forgetting the whole purpose of kata; that is, to preserve and practice self-defense techniques.

I can remember when I first started training Goju-ryu. I would go home and practice walking in sanchin dachi, focusing on balance and grounding and using a crescent step. It felt so unnatural, but I was committed to

practicing it until it felt good. Nowadays I try to make all of my movement as natural as possible, but it doesn't look very much like the demonstration kata I see at tournaments. There's very little locked-down movement, labored breathing, rigid holding of postures. Some would no doubt say my kata is "sloppy," that I'm not really concentrating. Where are the punctuated, staccato movements, they might ask? The dynamic tension? The deep stances? The loud breathing? The scowling look intended to intimidate the meek? But kata, it seems to me, is not a performance piece, and we're not role-playing. If anything—and if it's even possible—we're trying to demonstrate our understanding of kata applications, or bunkai, every time we do kata. We're trying to show that we understand the principles of good martial movement. That's hard enough. Oh, and then trying to move naturally. You see, there it is again, Nature. It's always at the heart of things.

## How Many Different Versions Are There?

Late February. Two ravens fly off overhead and a northern flicker calls in the distance, sounding as though it just remembered some humorous remark from the day before, or else it's simply laughing at the squirrels. Perhaps a hiker has stumbled over a tree root and the birds find this as entertaining as we might find an old Chaplin comedy. How many times did Chaplin seem to stumble over something in the road and then look back to find nothing at all? I suppose the simple act of walking could be humorous to a bird that can fly so gracefully through the tangle of tree limbs overhead. The winter, with the trees stripped of their leaves, must be easier, though, for the birds, while we slip and shuffle awkwardly along the icy trails.

But the winter uncovers the forest for us too. You can see deep into the woods. Everything is laid bare. The yellow-bellied sapsuckers have been busy here. Many of the trees along the trail have large nest holes dug into them. Some have three or four nest holes running up one side, as if these were avian versions of high-rise apartments or a monastic complex, isolated like the great religious complexes that dot the sandstone cliffs of ancient Greece.

Most likely, the female yellow-bellied sapsuckers weren't quite satisfied with any of the nest holes here, or at least most of them. Perhaps they were too close to the trail or they faced the wrong way, so the male worked diligently carving out another, and then another. It's hard for me to tell the difference, but I've read that the female will come and inspect each one, and she won't begin to build a nest and mate until she approves of the site. It almost makes me feel a bit sorry for the male, who must wonder exactly what it is his prospective mate is looking for. It all seems a bit hit or miss. Perhaps the male himself, after all this work, is asking, what's the difference?

Of course, all of this had me wondering yet again why there seemed to be so many different versions of Goju-ryu kata. I have often wondered about this, unwilling to resign myself to the idea that with so few historical records there are just some questions that will probably never be resolved.



When I first went to Okinawa—maybe thirty years ago now—I knew what I assumed was the Toguchi or Shoreikan version of the classical Goju-ryu canon of kata. I’m not entirely sure we did the Shoreikan versions in all cases, since my teacher had trained in both the Shoreikan dojo and the Shodokan dojo of Higa Seiko sensei. But when I first went to Okinawa we trained in only Shodokan dojos—with Gibo Seiki sensei and Higa Seikichi sensei. There were differences in kata. Not much in Saifa and only very small and somewhat insignificant differences in Seiunchin. (The back-to-back wrist technique that looks like an elbow attack was one difference.)



*Figure 3-22 These angular techniques, which occur four times in Shisochin kata, are conventionally taught as the initial blocking technique that precedes an arm bar.*

In Shisochin, however, there were a number of differences, and it was difficult for me to know at the time whether these were important differences that would affect how I saw the application of these techniques or whether they were differences in appearance only. There was a difference in how the conventional forearm “arm-bar” technique was executed, such

that I would come to question whether it was, in fact, an arm bar. There were some stance differences as well, and the turning direction in the final technique was to the right instead of the left—a seemingly insignificant but potentially important difference.



*Figure 3-23 This clasped-hand technique from the first sequence of Seipai kata is conventionally taught as a response to an opponent's two-handed lapel grab, snaking the hands through the attacker's two arms to push them away and break the grab.*

In Seipai kata, there seemed to be few differences of any consequence in the performance of the kata—though interestingly the Shoreikan version had an extra turning over of the clasped hands at the beginning—but in Sanseiru there were many. In fact, this kata, with its controversial past, seemed to be the most varied. When I asked Gibo sensei about this, he laughed and said he knew seven different versions of Sanseiru. In the Shoreikan version, for example, where we step back at the beginning of the kata, we were told it was to block and grab a kick. Then both hands were raised up in front of the chest in a kind of crossed hands or X formation and

rotated as one stepped forward to kick. The hands moved differently in the Shodokan version. Then in the middle of the kata—the open hand techniques that begin the third and final bunkai sequence of the kata—the techniques appear to be quite different (see “What’s Wrong with That Guy’s Kata?,” page 96).

There were other differences too. Kururunfa began on the opposite side. Seisan, in the Higa Seiko version of the kata, used what has come to be known as the “sun and moon block” instead of three rising palm strikes. And Suparinpei had a few small, seemingly insignificant differences. But the real question for me, at the time, was how different teachers, who all had claims to having trained under the same person—Miyagi sensei, in this case—could practice different versions of the same kata?

Some differences, after all, could have profound influences on bunkai. Did some teachers favor certain bunkai over others (imagining for the moment that there could even be multiple correct bunkai), and this, however subtly, affected the way they did kata? Did some teachers not learn the applications, possibly affecting their understanding and performance of kata? Does bunkai inform kata, or does kata inform bunkai? I don’t know what would be the case historically, but I have often seen people alter kata movement when performing applications against a partner and still call it bunkai. Would this, over time, affect how one did kata? Or did some teachers have physical idiosyncrasies that their students mistakenly copied?

For example, after the opening three “punches” in Sanseiru, most schools perform what looks like a right open-hand block followed by a move where the left forearm is thrust down and the right hand is brought up along the right side while stepping back into a long Front Stance. (See “Don’t Hit Anyone,” fig. 1.3.)

If you are told that this is a block of an opponent’s kick, does this influence how you do kata? Could it also, over time, however subtly, have influenced various hand positions? Is it logical for an attacker to initiate an attack with a low kick, especially from a distance that would allow one to block it this way? Is this even the best way to block a kick? If this is a lethal attack, why isn’t one responding with a more lethal counterattack ... and why isn’t it shown?

There are differences in kata that are insignificant; that is, they don't change the bunkai. This is true of the middle section of Sanseiru (Again, see "What's Wrong with That Guy's Kata?" figs. 2.23–24). It doesn't really matter whether you are performing these open-hand techniques in Basic Stance with the left foot forward in the first instance or in shiko dachi and stepping in with the right foot. The bunkai is the same—perhaps not the conventional bunkai that shows the defender grabbing the opponent's kick, blocking a head punch, and then moving in for a throw—but the same head-twisting neck break.

Most of the differences between different schools of Goju-ryu were just due to idiosyncratic preferences, I suspect, but they've given rise to all manner of differences in interpretation, in how we might apply these techniques. And endless squabbling. Like the nest holes of the yellow-bellied sapsucker, there may be subtle differences in appearance here and there, but any one of them would probably serve the purpose. Or is that the northern flicker I hear in the distance laughing over something trivial?

## Connections

The temperature hit 50 degrees. Spring seemed just around the corner, even though the paths through the woods were still covered with ice. The last snowfall had been packed down along the most traveled paths from countless boots and dog paws, melting in the daytime and then refreezing at night. The snow was gone alongside the trails. Even in under the shade of the evergreens, it looked like fall, with a blanket of dead leaves spread out everywhere. You could hear the squirrels hurrying about, surprised, I suppose, that anyone was out in the woods today—it was really too icy to navigate the trails. It was a day to bushwhack off to the side of the main trails, looking for landmarks, heading up the hill in the general direction of the ridge with its outcropping of rocks.

Off in the woods in the late winter and early spring, the trees stand quietly, no wind rustling through the leaves, as if they are patiently or perhaps stoically waiting for warmer weather, for the longer days that will tell them it's time to wake up, to "shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit," though I don't know why Shakespeare's words should come to mind now. The woods in winter seem far more prosaic, or at least I do, plodding along the trails.

Without the leaves and underbrush, you tend to notice the trees themselves more. Most of the lower branches have dropped, scattered across the forest floor. The ones that have fallen on the trails have been picked up and thrown off into the woods, keeping the path clear for hikers. The bark is the only thing that tends to distinguish one tree from another in the winter, though there are the odd aspens and small oak saplings that have hung onto a few of their dry, brown leaves. There are oaks here, but they confuse me. There are red oaks and pin oaks and eastern white oaks and maybe a chinquapin scrub oak, but I can't tell the difference just from the bark. I'd need to see the leaves, and even then I'd have to bring along Sibley's tree guide. The birches are another story, what with the horizontal striations up and down their trunks, and there are a lot of birches, scattered in their own little groves along the trail. There's the familiar paper birch, though sometimes from a distance it looks an awful lot like a quaking

aspen. Then there's the yellow birch and the river birch and the black birch, also known as sweet birch because they used the sap for making birch beer.

I used to have two large European white birch trees in back of the house. One had a trunk almost three feet in diameter, and it must have been over sixty feet tall. But we lost them both to borer beetles and had to cut them down.

The birches are all related, of course—you can see the lenticels on the bark quite easily—but I think it's rare that they interbreed. Yet the fact that there are so many related species here calls to mind that old discussion about Goju-ryu kata origins that seemed to rage for years, and still crops up now and again: that originally there were only four kata that formed the classical curriculum of Goju-ryu: Sanchin, Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei. The other kata were added later by Miyagi Chojun sensei, the argument went, but were not part of the original system taught by Kanryo Higashionna. It's an easy argument to make since there is no documentary proof either way and there is an obvious similarity between the techniques of those four kata. In fact, it wouldn't be too far-fetched to suggest that Suparinpei itself is a sort of composite of the three other kata; there are so many similar techniques.

But then why not Seiunchin? There are similarities there too. Look at the opening mawashi series in Suparinpei and compare it to the opening series in Seiunchin, the right-hand head grab and left-hand nukite to the chin or neck. It may not be identical—Suparinpei comes off a mawashi uke technique while Seiunchin comes off an arm-bar technique—but the application is the same. And neither one is an end in itself—that is, the finishing technique in Seiunchin is only shown after the third repetition, and the possible finishing techniques in Suparinpei are shown separately later in the kata.



*Figure 3-24 The angle technique we see in Suparinpei kata.*

And what about the opening technique in Seiunchin, the left-hand grab release that begins the kata? (See “Ah, He’s Just Old. What Does He Know Anyway?,” page 189.) The movement at least, if not the application, is similar to one of the techniques at the beginning of Suparinpei, one of four steps into shiko dachi done along the northwest-southeast and southwest-northeast angles (fig. 3.24).<sup>3</sup> In both cases, the key principle is the dropping of the elbow as the left hand is rotated up while the defender drops into shiko dachi.

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<sup>3</sup> Or is the Suparinpei technique something entirely different, a controlling or bridging technique meant to be tacked onto the end of the opening mawashi technique?

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Both at least *look* similar, like release techniques from an attacker’s cross-hand grab. The difference is that Seiunchin kata is a good deal clearer than Suparinpei because the structure of Seiunchin clearly shows a bunkai sequence with a beginning, middle, and end. Suparinpei, because of the

uniqueness of its disjointed structure, only shows a controlling and finishing technique here. We are meant to “understand” that the complete application requires the use of the left-side mawashi uke and right nukite attack. Interestingly, if we were to use this Suparinpei forearm technique in a similar manner to what we see in Seiunchin (fig. 3.25)—that is, against the cross-hand grab that we see in the first sequence of the kata—the logical finishing technique for this is the step back into a left-foot-forward shiko dachi, attacking with a left-arm gedan barai or what is often called a down block. We see this in Seiunchin kata as the finishing technique for each of the angle sequences. (See “Hojo Undo,” page 224.)



*Figure 3-25 The Suparinpei angle technique if we were to apply it against a cross-hand wrist grab, similar to what we see in Seiunchin kata.*

On the other hand, perhaps the only relationship between these two kata is that Seiunchin shows variations based on similar themes. If we tack the left forearm of the Suparinpei angle technique shown above onto the end of the opening mawashi uke and nukite (see “The Homogenization of



Technique,” page 69), it serves as an effective method to bring the opponent’s head down, particularly when used in conjunction with the turning of the body (fig. 3.26). Using this forearm controlling technique also leaves the defender in a position to apply a number of finishing head-attacking techniques from other classical subjects, including Seiunchin.



**Figure 3-26** *The Suparinpei angle technique if we were to apply it as one possible continuation of the opening mawashi uke—that is, connecting it, just as we might also connect the “double punch” and the mawashi head-twisting technique in Cat Stance.*

So should Seiunchin kata be included in the “original” kata of Goju-ryu, since it too shows distinct similarities to Suparinpei? Or if not, could we at least say that both kata might be traced back to the same system, whether Higashionna brought these kata from China or Miyagi sensei brought them back from one of his own journeys? And if Seiunchin, why not Shisochin and Seipai and Kururunfa? After all, I’d be hard-pressed to tell the difference between the leaf of a black birch and an American beech tree, and birches are related to alders and hazels and hornbeams as well.

# SPRING



*In a forest of a hundred thousand trees, no two leaves are alike. And no two journeys along the same path are alike.*

—PAULO COELHO, *ALEPH*

# The Landscape Is a-Changin’

A week ago I was out snowshoeing through the woods on trails covered with eighteen inches of snow, and today the trails are almost bare. Small piles of snow seem to hide in the shadows or lie under fallen trees on the north side of the hill. The leaves alongside the trail are wet and you can almost smell an early spring. In a few weeks, the landscape will be totally altered once again. The trees will leaf out and the weeds will cover the rocks in the marshy places. Everything will turn green and it will be hard to see off into the woods from the side of the trail. Phoebes and chickadees and wood thrushes will replace the crunching sound of feet plodding through the snow.

It’s not as if the landscape doesn’t constantly change—after all, it’s New England, and these are seasonal changes that happen every year—but they seem more noticeable in anticipation, when they’re just about to change, or, on the other end of it, in hindsight.

I was thinking about this as I walked along the trail, leaving the last remnants of packed-down ice in the middle of the path to walk along the edge of the forest, kicking up the leaves that had been hidden under the snow since last fall. The landscape of the martial arts has also changed quite a bit from its beginnings hundreds of years ago, I imagine. Most people are involved in “sport” karate nowadays, it would seem. Look at almost any karate school and you will see shelves lined with trophies and young kids facing off with padded vinyl gloves and headgear ready to do battle.

But even those who practice more traditional karate are probably not practicing kata and bunkai the way that it was originally intended. We live in a different world. The landscape has changed.

Is our approach traditional if much of what we’re training is based on Gekisai or Pinan kata or other training subjects that were created fairly recently instead of the core classical or koryu kata? I’m not sure I even know what the term *traditional* refers to anymore, since it seems to be applied in so many different ways or to schools that seem to differ in how they train and what subjects they teach. “Traditional” to me simply means

the old koryu kata that by most accounts came originally from China, passed on from Higashionna to Miyagi to the rest of us. The original applications, I believe, are discoverable, whether we stumble upon them or we figure them out based on logic, an understanding of kata structure, or the application of martial principles.

So I found it rather curious when an editor of martial arts books asked me how I imagined karate was going to “progress” given my position. How was Goju-ryu going to grow and change, he asked, if there was only one way to understand the classical kata? In other words, how was the tradition going to change, or, if I understood his meaning correctly, how was it going to improve?



*Figure 4-1* Convention suggests that this technique from Seipai is used as an arm bar.

Am I missing something? I thought the very notion of tradition implied that we were attempting to preserve something, or to discover what it was

originally, before the landscape changed and the traditions may have been altered.

But regardless, why should a tradition “grow” or “improve”? I think the idea of passing on a tradition like karate (Goju-ryu, in my case) is for the individual to grow within that tradition, to learn and understand the principles upon which it is based and get better at them. The individual practitioner may change, perhaps even become a better person through training, but not the art.



*Figure 4-2 It works much better if it is applied around the opponent's neck, and it makes much more sense.*

Whenever I get into discussions of this sort, I'm reminded of a teacher I once encountered. He had changed the Back Stance (*kokutsu dachi*) to Horse Stance (*kiba dachi*) in all of his kata because he didn't see the point of the Back Stance. Horse Stance, he said, seemed like a more stable stance. Now, of course, the Back Stance in Shotokan had itself been changed from

the Cat Stance of Shorin-ryu, I think, but change is not always for the better, and certainly change based on a limited understanding (this was a young teacher) is a bit suspect. When you have altered the kata so dramatically, have you retained the same principles? Do you have the same bunkai? Can you create a “new” tradition?

When I’m explaining an application for some technique in kata, I often find myself showing the conventional application for a technique and then explaining why I don’t find it to be a particularly good interpretation. Perhaps it doesn’t really follow kata, or it’s not realistic, or it requires the attacker to simply stand there with his arm out while the defender applies his technique. I think we often confuse what is traditional with what is merely conventional, and we need to question what is merely conventional.

Perhaps the landscape of the martial arts changed when it moved into the dojo, when teachers started to popularize a deadly martial tradition and average people started stepping onto the tatami mats. And then we put on karate uniforms or judo *gi* to formalize the distinction between when we were practicing a martial art and when we were simply living our lives. We incorporated rituals and special language, all of it becoming part of training in a “traditional” dojo.

I suspect the landscape of the martial arts has changed a good deal over time, just as the seasons alter the landscape of the forests. And as it changes, I find myself still turning to look back down the trail to see if I can see where it all began.

## Ah, He's Just Old. What Does He Know Anyway?

Everything looks old as winter comes to an end. Even in late March, when we've passed the vernal equinox, piles of dirt-covered snow linger everywhere, catching up bits of debris and chunks of pavement pushed along by the winter plows. A worn and frayed pair of mismatched gloves sits on the bench near the entrance to the conservation area along with an old scarf, waiting for someone to come and claim them. But they're old. They will no doubt soon be swept away, taken by the squirrels to line their nests or just gathered up and thrown in the trash. They don't seem to fit this new year. The spring grasses have started to sprout along the trail, and even the birds seem to sense that the winter has passed. I saw two robins a week ago. They may have wintered over, but if they did, they've been hiding all this time. Perhaps they were here all along, camouflaged like the little gray goldfinch that doesn't sport its yellow coat until the sun gets a bit stronger, gilding its feathers like Icarus before the fall. Do we notice these things in the winter, or does our attention only come alive in the spring, like migrating birds?

Sometimes, I think, everything seems more distinct in the days of winter or the early spring; things stand out in sharp contrast against a cloudy sky or the uniformity of the dead leaves that blanket the ground, broken only by the occasional moss-covered boulder lying about or the first fern-like plants to push their way up through the leaves. Out with the cold, in with the new.

It reminds me of a story I came across, years ago now, in a popular martial arts magazine. The author was comparing the Cat Stance of Shorin-ryu with the Back Stance of Shotokan, since it seemed that the Back Stance had replaced the Cat Stance in many of the Shotokan kata, which were, of course, the same kata that are found in the original Shorin-ryu that Funakoshi sensei had studied on Okinawa. The author's theory was that on mainland Japan, where Funakoshi sensei had gone to teach karate, his students had misinterpreted his stance, since he was by then fairly old and teaching young university students. The higher, more relaxed-appearing Cat

Stances were thought to be due to Funakoshi's age. (Of course, there was another theory that the Japanese had lengthened the stances of Shorin-ryu because they were getting pushed around by Japanese judo players, but this seems less likely, since one doesn't stand still, as if immobile, in karate.)

I have always liked this explanation, even if there is little evidence to actually support it. Changing kata creates all sorts of problems, however subtle those changes may seem. When you change the Cat Stance to a Back Stance, you have lost the implication of a kicking technique—whether a front kick (*mae geri*) or a kick with the knee (*hiza geri*)—and greatly affected the bunkai of a kata.



**Figure 4-3** The first technique of Seiunchin kata is a response to a cross-hand wrist grab, though one should keep in mind that the wrist grab is unlikely to begin an encounter. More probable is that the grabbing techniques occur at some point during a close quarters encounter.





***Figure 4-4** Both hands are brought up on the outside of the opponent's arm simultaneously as one steps forward and down into a Horse Stance.*

A number of years ago, I was watching a video of Yagi Meitoku sensei, the founder of Meibukan Goju-ryu, doing Seiunchin kata. He must have been well into his eighties by the time they filmed this. He looked feeble and sometimes even a bit unsteady on his feet. But he began the kata, stepping out with his right foot into shiko dachi with his hands simultaneously moving up and out, back-to-back with the palms up, and then closing and pulling down, ending over each thigh. The difference I had noticed was that Yagi sensei did not step out to a right shiko dachi with both open hands pointed down, as is done in many schools. Nor did he step out to shiko dachi and then bring the hands up, palms down, fingers pointing toward each other, then separating them, making a circle until the backs of the hands meet again out in front of the chest, as I have seen some do. The interesting thing—perhaps as subtle as the difference one might notice in Funakoshi's Cat Stance and what became the Back Stance of modern

Shotokan—was that Yagi sensei, in the first technique of Seiunchin kata, moved his hands up back-to-back, as soon as he started to step forward; he didn't wait to drop into Horse Stance before his hands started to move.

I have seen various interpretations for each of these movements. In the first instance, where the kata is performed with the step into Horse Stance, the open hands in front of the thighs with the fingers pointing down, it has been suggested that the defender is responding to a bear hug from the rear. In the second instance, where the kata is performed with the step into Horse Stance and the hands are brought up, palms down, and then move in a large circle, finishing with the hands back-to-back at throat level, the defender is supposed to be responding to a double lapel grab or a two-handed choke.

The problem with the first idea is that there is no follow-up shown—that is, the techniques that follow the first move don't have anything to do with someone attacking from the rear. The problem with the second idea is that it ignores the feet, stance, and direction of movement, not to mention some of the principles of Okinawan karate. Why would you step into an attack of this nature?

I think the old guys may have known something that didn't quite get passed on to everyone. When I watch Yagi sensei doing Seiunchin kata, I can see him step to the right into shiko dachi, stepping to the outside of the attacker, who has grabbed the left wrist with his left hand—a cross-hand wrist grab. Yagi sensei is stepping in, but off line, to the outside of the attack. His arms move up at the same time as he steps in, and just as importantly, the elbow drops.

As the arms are brought down and the hands close, the left hand turns over to grab the attacker's wrist, and the right arm comes down on the attacker's elbow (fig. 4.5). This brings the attacker's head down. The defender's right hand then grabs the attacker's head, while the defender's left hand comes in to control the opponent's chin or attack the throat (fig. 4.6). This is serious self-defense. It shows off-line movement. It doesn't allow the attacker multiple attacks. It follows kata. And it's far more deadly.



**Figure 4-5** *The left hand rotates to grab the opponent's wrist as the right forearm is brought down just above the opponent's elbow, locking the arm and forcing the head down.*



**Figure 4-6** *The right hand comes up to grab the head or topknot, and the left hand comes in to attack the neck and control the chin for the remaining moves of this sequence.*

I can imagine how things may have changed. Perhaps stepping into shiko dachi first, before one moves the hands, is the way we first learn the kata, focusing on one thing at a time—basic movement that only becomes problematic when we use it to analyze kata, to find bunkai. Or we want to make it appear more dynamic. Sometimes unnecessary flourishes creep into the performance of a kata when we're not quite sure what the movements are there for anyway. Or we think, He's just old. So we don't do it that way. We change it. I don't know, but I think the old guys probably knew what they were doing.

## A Step at a Time ... Maybe That's the Problem

It rained all day today. And then it stopped. The sun came out and the clouds drifted off to the southeast. The water just sits there, collecting in pools, because the ground is still mostly frozen. Everywhere you look there are puddles reflecting the skeletal images of winter trees and bare bushes drooping by the side of the trail. Off in the woods, it's damp, and the swamp has overflowed the old gravel and dirt road that cuts through the conservation area on its way to the lake. But last year they put some stumps along the side and nailed down some planks so you can make it around the flooded part if you're careful and take your time—the planks are narrow and a little twisted, and the stumps shift a bit in the ground.

On the north trail, you have to step carefully from rock to rock to avoid the mud and standing water. In the spring this stretch of the trail is swampy, with skunk cabbage and small wild flowers that cover the rocks and provide a home to a host of little insects, but in the summer it all dries up again, and then the hikers chart a “social path” around the rocks, reconnecting with the trail as it begins to climb up the nearest hill. With the damp and the cold temperatures, however, the rocks are slippery. You have to pick your way cautiously across this little boggy area, scouting out your route, balancing on each slick stone, looking for flat surfaces or somewhere you can get a purchase, as they say, carefully placing one foot in front of the other.

One step and then pause, and then the hands come up, almost like a counterweight. For some reason it made me think of open-training time in Okinawa, when you watched senior students toiling with the nigiri-game across the dojo floor. At least that's what it reminded me of, with the slow and careful placement of each step, keeping balanced and steady. Beginners were over to the side, carefully trying to match their steps with the footprints outlined in white on the floor, shifting their weight from one foot to the other as they practiced walking in sanchin dachi.

I wondered how this sort of care—focusing on one step at a time, one thing at a time—informed our practice of kata and, ultimately, our

understanding of the techniques of kata, the applications. I understand the need to break complex movements down into smaller, more manageable bits, sometimes separating the steps and movements of the feet from whatever the hands and arms seem to be doing, particularly when we're learning something, but I wonder whether this piecemeal approach to the teaching of kata has a detrimental effect on someone's ability to understand the applications of the techniques themselves?



*Figure 4-7*

I have often watched senior students, and even teachers, do kata in this sort of fragmented, staccato manner: First they step, then pivot, then the left hand moves, then the right hand moves, then the right hand moves again, turning over as it drops to the knee, then the right hand is brought up to the hip, then the left hand rotates as the body turns squarely to the front, and finally they both push forward. This is how you might describe the last technique in Saifa kata, the step into Cat Stance with the mawashi-like arm movements, as it is often demonstrated (figs. 4.7–11). The problem is that

in attempting to analyze kata movement when it is performed in this fashion—the way we learn kata as a beginner—we often assume that there should be an explanation or application for each separate movement. And this is a problem.



*Figure 4-8*



*Figure 4-9*





*Figure 4-10*



*Figures 4.7–11. The last mawashi in Saifa if it were to be photographed in the staccato style in which it is usually performed.*

When we do kata this way—breaking each technique into smaller and smaller pieces—and then attempt to assign meaning to each of these pieces, we fail to see the technique as a whole. We fail to see how the arms and legs—indeed the whole body—function as a whole. We have, in fact, put artificial gaps into what should be a single fluid movement. What should be seen in this instance as a final, head-twisting technique attached to the previous series of moves (beginning with the sweep and over-hand hammer fist or forearm attack) is instead seen as a series of individual blocks against multiple attacks, culminating in a final push.

It's fine to take the movements and techniques of kata apart in order to teach them. This is the way we learn most things. But you have to put them back together at some point. There really should be no gaps. Someone who has just learned a kata looks as if they are picking their way across a boggy meadow, stepping carefully from rock to rock. Someone who has been

practicing the same kata for years, however, should be fluid, without any discontinuity in their movements—you should see the connection between the arms and the legs. When they step into the last technique of Saifa kata, for example, turning to the front in Cat Stance, there are really only two movements: one to gather the opponent's head, one hand on the chin and the other on the back of the head, and the second to twist the head and attack it with a knee kick (see "Things Aren't Always What They Seem," page 106). If you were beating time on a drum, you would hear two thumps, and that's it—one, two. Of course, the way most people perform kata, they look as though their feet have sunk in the mud and their hands are carefully parting the reeds to get a better view. If we're aware of this, however, and keep it in mind, maybe it will help when we go back to look at kata applications. At the very least, it might keep us from looking as though we're picking our way over half-submerged rocks in a marsh.

# The Influence of the Times

The vernal pools have started to appear along the trail. It's spring. There are Canada geese overhead. An unexpected light coating of snow from the day before has melted and turned the trail to mud wherever rivulets of water run down the slightest incline or an old stream bed crosses the trail. In the summer these running springs dry up, leaving behind miniature fingerlike moraines in among the rounded rocks and boulders, as if a glacier recently receded. Actually, this whole mountain, quite surprisingly, was once volcanic. Blackened bits of volcanic rock appear haphazardly along the edge of the woods in the summer when the trail is dry and the leaves have been shredded and stamped to a fine dust by hundreds of hikers' boots and dog paws, eroding the trail another sixteenth of an inch, compacting the ground over time, ensuring that there is a trail immune from the efforts of long-buried acorns and catkins and trailing vines trying to push their way up through the soil.

Today, however, there are long wet smudges where a boot heel has so obviously slipped or skidded across the watery surface of a flat rock. These skid marks tend to color my perception of the trail, and I find myself carefully watching where I put my feet, though in reality there are hundreds of footprints going up this trail and very few places to mark where someone has slipped or lost their footing.

In the wet places, where these vernal pools appear, there are "social paths" that now meander off through drying woods and ground that seems a bit higher than the trail. A small cluster of beech trees stands at a bend in the trail, each with someone's initials carved in its smooth-barked trunk. It reminds me that these woods, which were once a primal wilderness, have now been largely tamed. The trails have been cut and the forest is managed to some extent. There are regular forays of bird-watchers and dog walkers and concerned citizens looking for nonnative invasive species to rip out and cart away. My perception of the forest, and what I should like to call "the wilderness," has been conditioned, no doubt influenced, by the times.

In some sense, this is like looking at kata through a glass darkly, like looking through an early morning fog that sits in the valley, hiding the river and the woods on the opposite bank, trying to discern not only the movements of someone in a distant clearing doing kata but the reasons for the movements as well, the bunkai. We are conditioned, it seems to me, to see fighting or self-defense in terms of blocking, punching, and kicking. We tend to interpret our martial arts in familiar terms, as something akin to boxing. But what if, looking back some two hundred years or so, the times themselves influenced the martial arts of the period? And the irony is that we are left with the outward form (kata) of this ancient martial tradition, yet we attempt to interpret how to use it (bunkai) by overlaying it with a twenty-first-century template. It's as if we set out to trace letters on a stencil where we had accidentally superimposed a sheet of Arial fonts over an ornate Gothic alphabet.

Of course, much of this line of speculation only raises more questions. There are few easy answers here. Many of the self-defense techniques of the classical kata seem to begin from a grappling posture with a variety of techniques against grabs of one kind or another. Was this a response to how people dressed in ancient times? Was punching from the distance of an arm's length less likely and more awkward if one wore loose robes? Was one less likely to kick with the foot if one wore sandals or geta or zori? So many of the controlling and finishing techniques we find in Goju-ryu seem to show the grabbing of the opponent's hair or topknot (figs. 4.12–13), and knee kicks (hiza geri) seem much more prevalent than kicks with the feet. Do we no longer “see” these techniques in kata because most people nowadays, men at least, wear their hair short? Does the fact that we wear shoes most of the time make kicking with the foot a better option?



*Figure 4-12 One of the hair-grabbing techniques from Seipai kata.*



**Figure 4-13** One of the hair-grabbing techniques from Saifa kata. The left hand has grabbed the hair or topknot. After the upper-cut, the right hand grabs the chin. The step into what looks like an open-hand block, and the straight “punch,” twist the opponent’s head.

If the martial arts were largely practiced by—perhaps even developed by—the military classes, wouldn’t you be most likely to fight empty-handed only *after* you lost your weapon? And in that case, wouldn’t you be most likely to charge your opponent, who may still have a weapon, so that his use of that weapon would not be to his advantage? In other words, would I really want to stay at a boxing range, arm’s length, against someone with a weapon? Granted, the safest thing to do would be to run away. But if one chose to fight, and one could close the distance quickly, wouldn’t the ensuing brawl involve grappling?



**Figure 4-14** *A collection of Chinese bladed weapons in the Matayoshi hombu dojo.*

I think in some sense this may involve an understanding of the practice of Okinawan weapons (kobudo) too, and particularly the staff (*rokushakubo*). If the practice of weapons was primarily engaged in by the military classes, wouldn't these long weapons for the most part have been bladed? If that's the case, does it change how we see certain "poking" or "hooking" or "pulling" movements in different bo kata? And did the substitution (if that's indeed what happened) of a staff for a more militaristic bladed or halberd-style weapon come about due, once again, to the influence of the times?

I can walk off in the woods and pretend that I've left civilization for a time. I can sit on a log under a leafy maple tree, and if I'm quiet enough and upwind, a deer might wander by, or an owl might perch in the same tree. But as I walk up the mountain, I see a tree that fell across the trail last week carefully cut in thirds, its pieces rolled to the side to clear the way for us wilderness hikers.



## What Seemed So Familiar

A light rain started about halfway up the trail. It had begun to clear earlier, but now it looked as though the proverbial spring showers were the order of the day. Everything was wet. The damp muffled my footsteps enough to hear the birds, and off in the distance I thought for a moment that I could hear the tree frogs calling from the vernal pools, the *Pseudacris crucifer* (spring peeper). There are few leaves yet and no new growth to see on the evergreens. Still, I was surprised at how much green there was as I walked up the hill through the pine saplings and mountain laurel. Fallen trees were covered with bright-green moss. Patches of lichen clung to the tree trunks. The older, more gnarled bark looks as though it was dusted with a fine blue-green powder, and even the granite boulders along the trail seemed to be tinged a grayish-green. Perhaps, as Annie Dillard says, “there is a bit of every season in each season.” It might have been fall or one of those freakishly warm days in winter. The temperature hit 57 degrees, the global average.

I was thinking about Seipai kata as I parted the branches and made my way carefully through the undergrowth to where the water had collected in a shallow pool. I held one arm up, protecting my face, and pulled a small branch aside with my other hand, absently thinking that this bore some resemblance to the double arm posture that begins the fifth and last sequence of Seipai (fig. 4.15), only I wasn’t standing in Cat Stance. The rain drops on the shallow water made it seem as though a thousand water bugs were dancing on the surface, but I didn’t see any tree frogs, though they would certainly have been alerted by my crashing through the bushes and stumbling over logs.

I was thinking about Seipai kata partly because it was the first kata we really took a close look at, and partly because it always seemed fairly clear, with a structure that was not overly complicated by repetitive movements and disconnected techniques. In fact, Seipai always seemed somewhat unique in that it appeared to have five complete bunkai sequences that were shown only on one side, in response to an opponent’s right-handed attack,

except for the last sequence, part of which is shown on both sides at the end of the kata.



*Figure 4-15 The initial technique of the fifth sequence in Seipai kata.*

Initially, for the sake of simplicity, we assumed that all of the opponent's attacks would be punches, thinking that the more important consideration was whether he was attacking with the right hand or the left hand. However, if you consider that the start of a confrontation may be the judo-like clinch—similar to what we see in the starting position adopted by two participants in an Okinawan sumo competition—then how you interpret different techniques may also change. In some cases, the difference may not be that pronounced. In the opening technique of Seipai kata, for example, it doesn't seem to matter much whether the opponent is attacking with a right punch or grabbing with the right hand. The defender simply uses his left forearm to cover or push down on the opponent's right arm.

The fifth sequence, however, may be a bit more problematic. This is the technique that begins in a left-foot-forward Cat Stance with what looks like a left middle-level block and a right hooking punch to the opponent's head (see fig. 4.15). It has always seemed to me a bit difficult to side-step an opponent's left punch here, stepping or shifting to the outside, bringing the left arm around to block on the outside of the opponent's arm. Additionally, I have often wondered why the first four sequences were responses to a right-hand attack while the fifth seemed to be a response to a left-hand attack. This seems to be a sort of structural oddity. And then there's the hooking punch that doesn't occur anywhere else in Goju-ryu classical kata.



*Figure 4-16 The same technique against an opponent's clinch.*

Simply put, though, if you change the attacking position to that which resembles the starting position we might use for a judo match—both arms up in a guarding posture or in a clinch—then the attack may still come from the opponent's right hand. The defender's right-hand hooking punch comes from the outside arm (fig. 4.16), attacks the opponent's head, and then

drops down across the opponent's left arm as the defender's left forearm is brought up into the opponent's neck. The sequence then continues with the defender stepping and turning counterclockwise 270 degrees, spinning the opponent around, and continuing to attack the opponent's head and neck.

The finishing technique of this sequence, one imagines, is the final technique of the kata, where the feet are brought together and the hands are brought in front of the abdomen, palms facing, with the right hand above the left. In this position, the defender has taken the opponent's head and, stepping back into Cat Stance, twists the head and neck a final time while attacking with the knee (see "Don't Hit Anyone," page 9), finishing with a left shuto to the opponent's throat (fig. 4.17).



**Figure 4-17** The defender's right hand in this final technique of the last sequence in Seipai kata holds the opponent's hair or topknot as the left open hand is brought around in a knife-edge attack to the throat.

Part of this sequence is repeated on the west side of the kata, but only part of it, the middle section. It is difficult to imagine what this structure

might mean since it is somewhat unique. It may be suggesting that the middle section can be used independent of the initial section. If this is the case, it may be showing that the arm that is on the inside of the judo-like clinch—the right arm on the second side—may be brought up to the opponent's neck in order to bring the head down. The sequence would then continue the same as it does in the first case (though on the opposite side), and the finishing technique, the last moves, would also repeat.



**Figure 4-18** *From a clinch, the inside arm may be brought up in order to bring the opponent's head down, continuing the rest of the sequence.*

Of course, maybe it is all about punching and kicking, and this is just fanciful rationalization, nothing more than a half-glimpsed figment of the imagination. There's a fog lying over the water and it's easy to imagine all sorts of things that may not be there. Even something as simple as a tree branch reaching out over the water's edge, past the ice that forms a film around the perimeter of the lake, can look like a lone fisherman standing

still, waiting for his line to dip. Squinting, I can see it's not, but things like that make me question my assumptions about kata as well.

## It Was a Gray Day

There was a cold north wind that gusted its way through the tops of the hemlock trees. It didn't feel as though spring was quite in the air yet, though by the calendar it certainly should have been. You could make out small red buds on some of the trees, but there was nothing else to really suggest that winter was over on a day like this, except that when the wind wasn't blowing, where the trail widened and there were fewer trees and very little undergrowth, the sun was warm. It might have been fall—the trees were still mostly bare.

I stopped by the edge of the swamp off Boggy Meadow Trail to watch a lone mallard drift lazily around the fallen trees. There's usually a lot of activity here. Sometimes you can see turtles hanging out on floating logs that beavers have felled and abandoned, probably because they were too big to maneuver through the maze of stumps and dead trees and branches that have broken off in storms or simply rotted and dropped in the water. The mallard, its iridescent green head catching the sunlight, seemed oblivious to my presence, but it was in its element and it knew that I was just a spectator. I'm not sure whether it was the sun breaking through the clouds or the mallard—the only bit of bright color in an otherwise dull gray landscape—that brought my attention to the grayness of everything around me. There are winterberry bushes with their red fruit and a few flowering weeds here and there, depending on the season, but all of the trees in the swamp, for as far as you can see, are dead, with dead gray bark—no greens or browns or rust colors here. It all reminded me that most things in life are gray in a metaphorical sense; nothing ever seems simple or black-and-white, especially, I suppose, when it comes to the applications of kata.



**Figure 4-19** *The first technique on the turn from Seisan kata, blocking with the right and attacking with the left palm strike ... or is it another block, as it is in Suparinpei?*

We were fooling around with a different application for the first sequence of Seisan kata some time ago, the sequence that begins with the first turn. I had noticed there was something about this sequence that reminded me of the first complete bunkai sequence in Suparinpei, the steps and open-hand “blocks” that follow the last angle technique in shiko dachi to the northeast (see the illustration in “Connections,” fig. 3.24). I have always assumed that in Suparinpei the defender is stepping in on an attacker standing in front of him; the first step, with the left foot and left hand coming to the outside of the attacker’s right arm and pushing down, and the second step, with the right foot and right hand, coming up inside the attacker’s left arm, pushing out. This is followed by another step and an attack with the left open palm, though the primary purpose is to bring the defender’s left hand past the attacker’s head in a technique reminiscent of the four-directional techniques of Shisochin kata (in the Shodokan version), then a kick with the right leg,



which brings the attacker's head into the defender's right elbow attack. Then the right arm comes out, and, with the left hand on the chin and the right grabbing the hair or back of the head, the opponent's head is twisted forcefully, breaking the neck (fig. 4.22).

In Seisan, on the other hand, I had always assumed—because it fit with the principles we find in many of the other classical kata of Goju-ryu—that in turning around we are stepping off line, avoiding and blocking the left punch of an attacker stepping in from the west—blocking his left punch with the semi-circular motion of the right arm while attacking the head with a left palm strike.<sup>1</sup> However, if the principle of stepping off line is *not* one of the things being illustrated by the structure of Seisan kata—if it is more akin to Suparinpei since there are many other similarities between these two kata—perhaps the bunkai or how to apply these techniques is also similar to Suparinpei. If one is simply turning to *face* an attacker who is either grappling with both hands or punching with first the left and then the right, we have something similar to Suparinpei, though initially on the opposite side. If this is the case, the defender would first block with the right from the outside of the attacker's left arm, pushing it down, and then block with the left on the inside of the attacker's right arm (fig. 4.20). Then, stepping forward with the right foot, the left hand, still in contact with the attacker's arm, pushes or pulls the attacker's right arm down, while the defender's right arm is brought up to attack the opponent's neck with a right palm-up shuto. Then, grabbing the hair (in ancient times, the topknot), the defender steps forward again, pulling the head down, while bringing the left palm up to attack and grab the opponent's chin (fig. 4.21). The sequence from here pivots to the right (or west), twisting the head, and employing the ubiquitous knee kick to finish.

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<sup>1</sup> This notion of off-line movement and the meaning of the directional changes in the classical Goju-ryu kata may, in fact, only apply to the lower kata (Saifa, Seiunchin, Shisochin, and Seipai), particularly if they are from a different source than Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei.

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**Figure 4-20** *The beginning of the first bunkai sequence in Seisan kata, if it were executed as an inside technique similar to the first full sequence in Suparinpei kata, though on the opposite side.*



**Figure 4-21** *The beginning of the head-twisting finishing technique in Seisan kata.*



*Figure 4-22 The beginning of the head-twisting finishing technique in Suparinpei kata.*

I'm not sure which is the right answer, at least so far as what may have been the original intent of kata, and in some ways this other application and the one I had always practiced—that is, stepping off line—are very similar. An awful lot may depend on the kind of attack the moves in kata are a response to, and that's the side that we can't see; all we have is the kata side, the defender's movements. And then there's the question of how this view might alter one's understanding of the other two bunkai sequences in Seisan kata. Would that, in turn, change how we thematically looked at the techniques of Seisan kata? Or, is each interpretation of bunkai substantially the same—that is, regardless of whether one is responding to a punch and stepping off line, or a clinch dealing with both of the attacker's arms, are the responses similar enough that each seems to reinforce the other? After all, the controlling and finishing techniques are the same.

Of course, even so, some ideas may be better than others. Or, it may be simply a matter of personal preference. I don't know. Sometimes there is a

lot of gray area in the landscape.

## Looking at Oak Trees

Up the hill on the far side of the conservation area where I often walk, the oak trees predominate, taking over for the pines and hemlocks that seem to prefer the other side where it's shadier and the ground is wetter, with a number of small streams or rivulets trickling down toward the lake in the early spring. There are also outcroppings of granite here, covered in moss, and mountain laurel that grows so thick along one side of the path that it almost seems as though someone had planted hedges. This is where the butterflies gather in the summer. At the top of the hill, the forest floor is covered with oak leaves all year. It doesn't matter what the season; the look is still the same, with a carpet of brown leaves everywhere—mostly red oak and pin oak, though I think there are some white oak and chinquapin oak too.

The oaks are wonderfully durable looking, of course, craggy and almost avuncular with their gnarled branches and patches of blue-green lichen that seem to have colonized the bark on one side, looking like alien spoor that have fallen from the sky and splattered the tree trunks. Of course, the oak trees endure all of this; that's their nature. They're steadfast and long-lived, firmly rooted and unwavering—symbols of strength and endurance. Oak is a hard wood, unlike the pine that shares this forest. We use its wood to make floors and furniture. The Okinawans used the red oak to make rokushakubo.

This sort of personification of the oak always reminds me of how we often seem to think of Sanchin kata in the curriculum of Goju-ryu. It is almost universally recognized as the foundation (or at least fundamental) to the practice and understanding of Goju. And yet I have often wondered what exactly is so foundational or fundamental about this kata. Its techniques are so basic—composed of only a few simple and relatively straightforward movements—that it would be difficult to argue that an understanding of Sanchin, no matter how complete, would lead one to a more thorough understanding of the techniques contained in the other classical kata. But its position within the curriculum seems so sacrosanct that any questioning of its purpose or nature seems somehow blasphemous.

But few teachers do anything more than document the outward shape of the kata—that is, confining themselves to a brief description of the stance, the stepping, the position of the arms, the posture, and the coordination of the breath, with some utilization of *shime* (body checking). Most, I suspect, offer no explanation at all; the students merely follow along, mimicking the movements of their teachers and the other students in class. There are a few, of course, who indulge in suitably vague and cryptic references to meridians or descriptions of how one should guide one's breath to travel along the internal energy paths in order to be able to nourish and project one's qi. But in practice, Sanchin appears somewhat mystical, or at the very least confusing.

For some years now, in addition to my regular training, I have set out to practice Sanchin kata three times a day, every day, not blindly as if I were merely going through the motions, but with an eye to understanding what this particular kata was trying to teach me. When I was younger, I spent many years undergoing both “hard checks” and softer checks of my kata. Sensei would step up on our legs, throw punches at the latissimus dorsi, bring his palms forcefully down on our shoulders, and break boards over our thighs and extended arms whenever we put on a demonstration for the public. All of this “checking” seemed to solidify the general impression that Goju was a “hard” style of karate that emphasized physical conditioning and toughness. Over the years, however, I found myself questioning many things about the oak-like hardness that seemed to characterize the practice of Sanchin, and by extension find its way into the general practice of Goju. And then there are all of the apparent contradictions. What purpose could an immovable stance serve if one of the first martial principles we see illustrated in the other Kaishu kata (and its bunkai) is to get out of the way or to move in such a way that your attacker has only the one opportunity (the initial grab or punch or push) to attack you?

After all, Goju-ryu is supposed to be both “hard” (*go*) and “soft” (*ju*). But I also started to wonder what the intention must have been if the kata was originally, as oral tradition tells us, an open-hand kata. Were we meant to strike with the open hand or push with the palm? The double-arm kamae posture, with both arms held up in front of the body, hands at shoulder level and elbows down, is also the beginning posture of Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei, and I have come to believe that the techniques of these kata are

largely based on close-in or grappling confrontations, and this, I believe, is the key to understanding the fundamental nature of Sanchin practice.

The hard checking, I think, really conveys the wrong idea, not just to the general public who may be watching a karate demonstration, but to the practitioner as well. The impression is that the one doing kata is able to take punishment, that he or she is able to withstand whatever the opponent is able to dish out. But this, I believe, is not what the practice of Sanchin is meant to develop at all. Rather, Sanchin is meant to develop a foundation, a stable posture if you will, from which to execute all of the other techniques in those kata that begin from the clinch—that is, Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei. Like pushing hands in T'ai Chi practice, any technique begins with the defender in a stable position to withstand the unbalancing efforts of the opponent and being grounded enough to unbalance the attacker. One could argue that all techniques begin here. Hard or soft checking, presumably passed down from teacher to student over the years, may actually help one's practice, but only if we can understand the things that such checking is trying to point out.

Most of the checking, whether hard or soft, should be done at the point where the movement has been completed—that is, for example, at the full extension of the “punch.” At that point, stepping on the back of the rear leg or pushing down on the calf is used to signal the one doing the kata that the energy of the “punch” or push should come from the heel of the rear leg, through the body, and out the arm. If the energy is not being projected up from the foot through the leg and waist to the arm, the rear leg will be weak and easily bent.





*Figure 4-23 Sanchin checking is used to give immediate feedback to the student.*

Slapping or pushing down on the shoulders should remind the practitioner to keep the shoulders relaxed and down, making the transfer of the energy through the waist that much easier. If the shoulder is too tense or raised up, the different parts of the body cannot work together.

Similarly, pushing or punching the abdomen is a reminder that the belly is relaxed and the mind (and the center) is in the dantien (tanden). Checking the small of the back or the straightness of the spine is the same thing. If either of these is not correct, the posture is weak and you will not have the balance or sufficient coordination of these elements to affect your opponent or to withstand your opponent's attack.

Punching the abdomen and slapping the buttocks really signals the student to rotate the hips up and forward and to engage the lower back.

Pushing or kicking against the side of the front knee is a forceful reminder that as the student pushes out, with the force beginning from the

heel of the rear foot, the front leg rounds out, with the knee over the foot, with a kind of elastic tension, not stiffness. This affects “grounding” oneself far more than simply spreading one’s toes and gripping the ground.

And lastly, we often see the teacher hold one hand up against the student’s punch while the other pulls lightly on the student’s other arm. To me, working against this sort of countermotion reminds me that whether we are pushing out or pulling in, we must use *koshi*—that is, all of these upper body movements must be generated by the waist. As it says in the Chinese classics: “The millstone turns but the mind does not turn. The turning of the millstone is a metaphor for the turning of the waist.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Wile, *T'ai-Chi Touchstones*, 19.

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So often, because of the perception that Sanchin kata is teaching one to be solid and unmoving, like the oak tree, we see students locked in place, immovable, with the trunk of the body as rigid as a toy soldier at Christmastime, as if the message here is to stand straight in the face of an attack and be able to withstand any punishment someone is able to mete out. But that’s not what Sanchin training is all about, I think. I love to look at the oak trees out in the woods, but I don’t want to look like an oak tree when I’m practicing Sanchin.

## Questions One Should Be Asking

The sun was out, but the forest floor was wet and spongy. It had rained pretty steadily for two days. And before that it had been cloudy and drizzling more often than not. The path along the swamp was flooded over again, and every dip in the trail was damp from slowly drying puddles of standing water. Whenever I stopped, I could hear the forlorn two-note call of the chickadee in the distance.

In places, ferns and broadleaf marsh plants hid the rocks and threatened to obscure the trail. Small delicate-looking wildflowers sprang up where the sun managed to get through the canopy of new leaves overhead. It reminded me of that part in Robert Fulghum's book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, where he says: "Remember the little seed in the Styrofoam cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up, and nobody really knows how or why...."

But then I thought, really? Nobody knows how or why plants send their roots down into the soil and the plant slowly pushes up through the forest floor? Maybe Fulghum was not looking for a scientific explanation. Maybe it was a sort of rhetorical question—even though it seemed to be a statement—some sort of ontological inquiry, and the little plants were only meant to be stand-ins.

The whole walk was somehow strangely reminiscent of childhood, all the sights and sounds and smells of spring. Of course, when I was a child, I still wondered about all of this—the trees, the seasons, the color of the sky in the late afternoon—that is, when I thought about it at all. I suppose most often we take things for granted and never really question them. We appreciate things the way they are and leave it at that.

Maybe some things are too obvious or don't need to be answered, like the ever-ready "How's it going?" Or "Nice day, isn't it?" There are a lot of questions that we'll probably never know the answers to, but this got me to thinking about all of the questions students should probably be asking in the dojo—that is, if students were encouraged to ask questions. Most of the time, I think, we discourage talking of any kind. I had a student who once

jokingly captured this reticence to engage in explanation, giving her impression of the response a typical martial arts instructor might have to a student's query: "If you have to ask, then you're not ready to learn."

But wouldn't it be interesting if someone asked even the simplest question—like, why do we use different stances? It might lead to other questions—like, are some stances just transitional?

Why is there a repetition, for example, of the "elbow" techniques in Seiunchin, showing them being done four times, two on each side? If the purpose of kata is to remember technique, is there really a need to repeat techniques? If the purpose in repeating a technique twice is to practice a technique on both the left and right side, then why aren't all techniques in kata done this way? Why would some techniques in Suparinpei be repeated four times?

What do the kata differences mean when you compare the different schools of Okinawan Goju-ryu? Do the differences indicate an altogether different bunkai, or a misunderstanding of what the original bunkai was, or merely a different take on the same bunkai? If the classical kata from different schools is the same, for the most part, why isn't there more agreement on bunkai?

Why are some techniques in kata executed slowly—like the first technique in Seipai, for example—while others are fast? Is this an indicator of the kind of attack that the kata creators envisioned?

In reality, how high are the kicking techniques in Goju kata? Isn't a kick to an opponent's knee much harder for the attacker to block than a kick to the mid-section—the height at which most front kicks are practiced, whether in kata or in *kihon* training?

Is there really such a thing as a Cat Stance in Goju-ryu kata, or is it merely an indicator, a teaching aid, if you will, to show where there is a kick?



**Figure 4-24** One of the postures from Kururunfa kata. The Cat Stance in Goju-ryu usually indicates a kick.



**Figure 4-25** The final technique in Seiunchin kata is often referred to as yama uke, but with the hands coming around the head, the step back into Cat Stance most likely indicates the use of a knee kick (hiza geri) to the opponent's face.

Why is Sanchin kata seen as fundamental when Goju-ryu does not seem to be predominately based on straight punches? If Sanchin was originally done with open hands, are these even meant to be punches? And if Sanchin was originally done with open hands, does that suggest that Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei may also have started with an open-hand kamae?

Why are so many of the Goju blocking motions circular? Why do many of the kata show what looks like a “block” stepping forward?

Why aren't all kata done in a straight line? Do the turns and angles of stepping mean anything? And why are most of the turns in kata to the left?

Do all of the kata conform to the same martial principles? Do you need to know the original bunkai in order to understand the principles?

What's the relationship between the Okinawan weapons arts (kobudo) and the Okinawan empty-hand systems? Can kobudo teach us about empty-hand kata—that is, if an empty-hand system is used when you don't have a weapon, was it designed for close-contact self-defense? And does this change how we should be seeing the applications of kata?

What would Socrates say? So many questions. But if you don't ask the questions ... well, you might as well be kicking up dead leaves in the woods.

# Hojo Undo



*Figure 4-26 Using a log for hojo undo training.*

Walking along the trail in the spring, you can see the evidence of the forest caretakers; the trees that had fallen over the winter, lying at odd angles across the trails, have all been neatly cut with a chainsaw, and a log the width of the trail has been carefully rolled off to the side. I look at these logs and think about carting one off to the dojo to use for training. It has to be just the right size—about three and a half to four feet long with a diameter anywhere from six to eight inches. We used to train with the log often. It's a good substitute for the old Okinawan *tan*—what looks like a short barbell with a thicker bar. We would cradle the log in the crook of the arm, with the arms up like the opening position of Shisochin kata, and then walk the length of the dojo, forward and back in sanchin dachi. At either



end, we would toss the log in the air by straightening out the arms, and then catch it again on the forearms. With the smaller logs, ones where the rough bark had been left on, we could practice grip strength, tossing the log in the air, and then with the palms down, catching it as it fell.



*Figure 4-27 Using the forearm to attack in Seipai and Seiunchin kata.*

But today, stopping to examine one of these large logs, the pileated woodpecker seems to be laughing at me from his perch in one of the dead trees along the trail. There's evidence of his work all along here—deep roughed-out rectangles that must look inviting to the small birds scouting out nesting sites in the spring. I'm not sure whether he is simply greeting me or scolding me, objecting to my presence in his woods—I've read that they are fiercely territorial—but I'm leaving anyway. I've had my walk.



**Figure 4-28** *Using the grip to pull the opponent down in Saifa kata.*

Yet it left me thinking about hojo undo, the supplementary exercises that are often an integral part of Okinawan karate training. They are usually done with a variety of old-style implements you often see in a traditional dojo. But you can make them yourself or employ various modern substitutes to effect the same results. To me, however, the one caveat is that the implements and the training one employs should be used to develop or strengthen the techniques one sees in the classical kata. In fact, one could argue that everything one does with respect to hojo undo training should be practiced with that in mind: how the exercise benefits one's ability to perform the techniques we see in kata. So, as blasphemous as it may sound, striking the makiwara should not monopolize the limited amount of time we may have to devote to supplementary training. There are many other techniques in the classical kata of Goju-ryu that actually seem more common or at least as deserving of supplemental training as the straight punch (*tsuki*). What about training implements to develop one's forearm

strikes? Or something to work on strengthening knee kicks? Or twisting motions to develop the muscles and ligaments and tendons we need to perform all of the mawashi techniques?

I suppose one could rely solely on *kote-kotai* (arm pounding) to develop one's forearm strikes, but what do you do when there's no one around to pound forearms with? I have a couple of old wooden sawhorses in my dojo. When Sifu Liu, the noted Feeding Crane master, saw them, he suggested I round the edges on the top two-by-fours a bit and use them for arm pounding. He thought the height was just about right.

The iron geta can be used to develop leg strength for knee kicks, but some sort of horizontal kicking post would also be good. I've sometimes used a medicine ball held in two hands for working on knee kicks—gruesome thought, but a fairly good approximation of the opponent's head in many of the techniques and applications we see in the classical kata.



**Figure 4-29** Using the grip and twisting strength of the arms to twist an opponent's head or neck in a technique from *Suparinpei* kata.

The nigiri-game are good to work on grip strength, of course, which occurs everywhere in the classical subjects, but there are also stick bundles. You get a handful of those three-foot skinny bamboo tomato stakes and put them in a cloth bag. You can twist them and work on splitting them with your fingers while gripping them. My teacher used to have us work in pairs twisting belts (*obi*) for the same effect.

The *kongoken* is another useful hojo undo tool. Legend has it that Miyagi Chojun sensei saw it being used by wrestlers on a visit to Hawaii and decided that it would be a good addition to the arsenal of Okinawan training equipment. It's a large, metal, elongated oval. It's heavy and perhaps a bit ungainly looking, but it would be a good way to train the use of the arms and hands in applying mawashi techniques—most of the mawashi techniques that we see in the classical kata are not for blocking, but rather for twisting the head and neck of the opponent.

Another tool one can use in a similar way is the *sashi-ishi*—a large round stone or concrete ball with a wooden handle through it. Since there is also significant weight here and the grip can be alternated, it can provide excellent resistance training for the mawashi movements.

Hojo undo training is important, but one should remember to keep it functional. Despite the appearance of techniques in kata—and one should always remember that the appearance of techniques in kata may be quite different from their actual applications—Goju-ryu largely comprises forearm blocks and attacks, grabbing, knee kicks, and head or neck twisting techniques. This is what we want to develop with hojo undo training—that is, it's not simply to develop strength per se. In fact, a reliance on physical strength often makes one's Goju too hard—often appearing too rigid—and gets in the way of truly understanding what is meant by “hard and soft” (*go* and *ju*).

# The Hemlocks Are Dying

It's wet in the woods today. Spring is really here, and everything is alive. Even the spiders are out. I can hear the stream that runs down the hill to the reservoir. In places where the evergreens are thickest, the forest doesn't look all that different in the spring than it did in the midst of winter. But the maples and the oaks and the birches and hickories have all leafed out and it's easier to see which trees have died over the winter, opening up patches in the canopy. On the ground beneath them, you can see seedlings ready to take over. On this part of the trail, where it's widest and there seems to be the most sunlight, small hemlock saplings, no more than a foot or two high, have sprung up along each side of the path. Farther up the trail, the giant hemlocks stand, many of them over a hundred feet tall by the look of them, and stately—they seem to have no need for spreading branches to establish their places, like the spruce trees or the balsam pines.

But the older hemlock trees are dying here. I can count dozens of them along the trail and more off in the woods, the bark stripped off in places, left like red mulch around the base of the tree. They've been hit by the woolly adelgid, an invasive species for which the hemlock has no natural resistance. The woolly adelgid weakens the tree, bringing the hemlock borer, and, after the borer beetles have burrowed beneath the bark of the tree, the woodpeckers attack, stripping the bark to get at the beetles. Fungus begins to grow around the roots of the diseased tree, and before long, the tree falls. The cold New England temperatures had kept the pest at bay for years, but now they're heading north as the winters warm, and they say the hemlock may go the way of the American chestnut. It shows, I think, it's all tied together; a chain of events that seems to connect things in a way that's difficult to see at the start—one thing leading to another or, if not so singularly predictable, a step in one direction changing the expected outcome while opening up any number of different possibilities, like a small alteration in the environment opening an existential niche that may not have been there before.

For some reason, all of this made me think of how we string the various techniques of a kata together. But I wasn't thinking about the sequences of

techniques in the standard way in which it is shown in kata—beginning with the receiving technique, then progressing with the controlling or bridging technique, and finishing with a throw or an attack to the neck or head—as much as I was thinking about how an understanding of the structure and themes of a kata allow one to move between the techniques of *different* kata within the system. Because the Goju-ryu classical kata are composed of sequences, it's fairly easy to begin with a technique from one kata and then, depending on how the attacker is moving or responding to your initial receiving technique, move into a bridging technique from another kata and, again, tack on a finishing technique from yet another kata. Understanding the themes or principles of the various classical subjects also helps facilitate this sort of flexibility, especially when each kata seems to be exploring a different theme or response to a different sort of attack. The entry or receiving techniques, then, probably show the greatest variety, though even here the possible ways to respond to any given attack are really finite.

How one bridges the distance in order to control the opponent is also varied, but the idea is basically to maintain contact after the initial receiving technique and, without putting oneself in further danger, move to the opponent's head or neck to finish the encounter.

For example, in the opening moves of Seiunchin kata—and in fact in many of the other techniques of this kata—both arms are brought to the outside of the opponent's attacking arm, whether we see this attack as a wrist grab or a punch or a grab of one's clothing. This position, shown against both a right and left attack and occurring as it does for only a fraction of moment, is the “listening point,” the point at which we have made initial contact with the opponent and the point at which, if we are sensitive to the attacker's energy, we continue with whatever techniques seem appropriate to the situation (fig. 4.30).



**Figure 4-30** The “listening point” that allows one to continue with any number of other techniques is the same for the first or the last sequence of Seiunchin.

If one were to continue the sequence from Seiunchin, using the second of these counters against the opponent’s right grab, the defender’s right hand would rotate in order to grab the attacker’s right wrist as the left forearm is brought down on the attacker’s elbow. This is the position in kata that looks like two down blocks in shiko dachi done at a 45-degree angle. (See “Ah, He’s Just Old. What Does He Know Anyway?,” page 189.)

However, if the situation changes or one senses that, for whatever reason, the arm bar is not an appropriate option, one might continue from this “listening point” to the initial moves of the fifth sequence of Seipai kata, for example, bringing the right forearm up to the side of the attacker’s neck. (This is the opposite side from what is shown in kata.) From here, one might stand up and continue the 270-degree “throw” from this sequence of Seipai (though on the opposite side from what is shown in kata), or one might straighten out the arm and continue with the opening sequence of

Seipai kata, bringing the head down, or one might maintain contact with the opponent, pivot into a Front Stance, and continue with the knee kicks to the opponent's ribs that we see in the opening sequence of Sanseiru kata (fig. 4.31).



*Figure 4-31 The first knee kick from the opening sequence of Sanseiru kata.*

Another example of this idea of change and sensitivity, or finding and studying the “listening points,” might be to use the somewhat ubiquitous outside-to-inside single arm block (fig. 4.32). In Goju-ryu, this receiving technique is often employed with a step to the side of an opponent's attack, and often facilitated by a slight rotation of the defender's body.

If we start from this initial outside “block,” we can, of course, continue by moving through any of the sequences from various kata that begin the same way, or we could bring the other arm up on the inside of the opponent's arm (fig. 4.33) into the arm-bar position that forms the core movement of Sanseiru kata or the opening *kamae* of Shisochin kata. From



here, of course, we can continue with any of the application sequences of Sanseiru or Shisochin.



**Figure 4-32** *The outside-to-inside receiving technique that we see in Seipai, Seisan, Shisochin, and Suparinpei kata.*



*Figure 4-33 Bringing the other hand up inside the attacker's arm leaves one in the double-arm kamae posture of Shisochin kata and also brings the opponent's head down.*

However, this same double-arm position is in itself a point at which change can be effected if the situation seems to require it. We could sweep the opponent's right arm down with the left arm and bring the right forearm up to attack the opponent's neck, putting us in a position to continue with a variety of controlling or finishing techniques from various kata. Or, we might reverse the inside arm, moving into the "elbow" techniques from the fifth sequence of Seiunchin kata (figs. 4.34–35). From this position, we can continue with the final techniques of Seiunchin kata, finishing with the yama uke attack with the knee to the opponent's head, or we could change this once again by grabbing the opponent's arm at the elbow and the wrist and pull down, as we see in the first sequence of Sanseiru kata (fig. 4.36.)

I think it is important to see the connections, but we can only really be comfortable with these kinds of connections when we understand the sequences of a kata and see the themes or principles contained within them.

We also have to be sensitive to the situation and prepared to change and adapt our technique. Once we are able to do that, the attack becomes relentless, sort of like the attack of the woolly adelgid on these stately hemlock trees, I think.



**Figure 4-34** *This controlling technique from the fifth sequence of Seiunchin kata is often viewed as an elbow attack.*



**Figure 4-35** Reverse-angle close-up of the initial entry technique from the fifth sequence of Seiunchin.



**Figure 4-36** *The controlling arm-bar pull-down from the opening sequence of Sanseiru kata.*

# Katahdin



*Figure 4-37 Mount Katahdin in Maine.*

I found myself thinking of Katahdin as I peddled up a hill off Adams Road the other day. It was a beautiful spring morning. A walk through the forest would have been welcoming on a day like this, but I decided to go for a bike ride instead, past farms with long stretches of open fields and stands of old forests and young apple orchards, roads bordered by stone walls that must have gone back to colonial times. The scenery was idyllic—almost like fall in New England—but what I found myself thinking about was the ordeal of climbing Katahdin last summer. I don't know why that came to mind—perhaps it was the early hour or something about the hills off in the distance, though I don't think there's another mountain that looks quite like Katahdin. Or maybe it was just the effort of slogging up a steep incline that brought me back to that hike.



*Figure 4-38 The author at the summit of Mount Katahdin in Maine.*

We camped alongside a small pond and climbed out of our tents at 4 a.m. in hopes that we might see a moose foraging in the reeds, but the moose probably learned long ago to avoid those campgrounds. And anyway, we hadn't come to watch the wildlife, though as we broke camp and packed up the truck to head off for the Roaring Brook parking area, a twenty-minute drive away, I heard the call of a Bicknell's thrush nearby, harmonizing with itself—its song sounding more like a whistling version of the Tuvan throat singers than a bird. And in the distance, another thrush answered.

Katahdin is an all-day hike, though in retrospect “hike” was probably not the best way to describe a climb up Cathedral and a scramble across Knife's Edge with a stiff wind gusting along the ridge. It's a far cry from my lazy meanderings around the Fitzgerald Lake Conservation Area or half-hour climbs up the local mountains that ring the valley where I live. Katahdin is the northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail—the same trail that ran through the woods along the ridge of the mountain I lived on as a child. Of course that's a long way from Baxter State Park and the wilds of northern Maine.

The Penobscot called it “the Greatest Mountain,” where the mythical Thunderbirds lived. It's the subject of many Native American legends,

which is the other reason I may have been thinking back to this hike. Some things seem so majestic and fill the imagination with such wonder that they almost appear mythical, like the great blue heron I saw sailing over a roadside swamp off Adams Road five minutes earlier. I stopped to watch it as it landed on the bank, partially obscured by the reeds.

The heron, like its distant cousin the white crane—the stuff of legend for many martial artists—feeds my imagination whenever I see one pass overhead with its slow, steady wingbeats, not at all like other birds with their frenetic flapping, looking as if they were, at any moment, about to fall or as though they were trying to quickly gain the next sheltered tree before some unseen predator came by. The heron seems to wing its way along with such composure, landing in close to the edge of the water where the reeds grow along the bank. These are mythic animals for me too.

Years ago, I had asked Matayoshi Shinpo sensei what animal techniques were thought to make up the Goju-ryu system. He replied that the animals were the crane, tiger, leopard, snake, and dragon. Somewhat naively, I suppose, I asked him which kata went with which animal, but he said they were all mixed up—the kata didn't break down so neatly. Any given kata might contain crane or tiger or snake techniques. Of course, over the years I haven't found that any of this has really helped my understanding of kata or bunkai.

In Kururunfa we have what some have described as crane-like postures, while others have said that the kata, particularly the opening techniques, come from dragon-style kung fu because the initial posture, it is thought, suggests a dragon rising from a lake (fig. 4.39). Dragons, however, are mythical; it's anyone's guess what a dragon looks like taking flight from the surface of a lake, its tail lashing the water. Anything so imagistic, without the corroborating evidence that the kata or the specific techniques actually occur in a kung fu system, is no doubt merely offering an opinion, particularly if we are basing it solely on appearances rather than the actual applications of the techniques.





**Figure 4-39** *This crane-like posture from Kururunfa kata may look like a crane folding in its wings for protection and standing on one leg, or a dragon as it takes flight, but I'm not at all sure that figurative description helps one to understand how the posture functions in a martial sense.*

For example, in the opening sequence of Kururunfa—shifting to the right into a left-foot-forward Cat Stance (though it makes little difference which side one begins on)—the right arm is brought over the opponent's left arm as the defender's left hand is brought up to grab the head. At the same time, the left knee is brought up into the attacker (fig. 4.40). This technique is shown on both sides. Then, as the sequence continues, the defender steps forward, picking up the opponent's chin with the right hand, and pivots counterclockwise, twisting the head, as the attacker is thrown to the ground. But it's not at all clear how an awareness of a particular animal, or any anthropomorphic characteristics we might assign to it, really helps one's understanding of the kata and how one would apply its techniques.



***Figure 4-40** The application of this first technique from Kururunfa kata shows a blocking motion with the left arm, a knee kick, and grabbing the opponent's head. The move that follows this is a pivoting head twist.*

The same might be said of Suparinpei. The open-hand techniques in shiko dachi at the end of the kata look somehow reminiscent of a tiger—the grounded stance, the attacks with the open palm, the use of both arms to control the attack—but appearances don't necessarily capture the more ethereal qualities we have come to associate with any of these animals. Perhaps we endow them with these mystical qualities because we hope to embody them in ourselves. Fang Chi Niang is said to have watched a crane fighting, later incorporating these principles into the martial system she had learned from her father. These are certainly powerful stories, but are they anything more than an extended metaphor, a poetic conceit, a means to describe movements that by their very nature are difficult to put into words? That is, the teacher might admonish the student to be light and fluid like the crane or to be fierce and unrelenting like the tiger in order to give the

student something a bit more concrete to guide his or her practice, grounded, no doubt, in our mythic relationship to the natural world.



*Figure 4-41 This is the tigerlike posture seen in the second of the double-blocking techniques at the end of Suparinpei kata.*

In the final sequence of Suparinpei, there are two open-hand “blocking” techniques, the second of which is done with a sliding step into a left-foot-forward shiko dachi. These are the techniques that remind some people of the tiger (fig. 4.41). This is followed by a right spear-hand thrust. (Is this the dragon spitting out its tongue?) Then the final technique in the kata is a turn to the original front with the hands moving in a kind of circular fashion, ending with both hands held up in what some have called “crane’s beak” position and others have referred to as “dog posture.” Metaphors are often used to clarify meaning, but sometimes they can be just plain confusing.

One of the keys to understanding Suparinpei kata lies in seeing how this double-blocking technique is applied, whether it is against a clinch or any

attack with both arms. (See “Footfalls in the Forest and Suparinpei,” page 60.) First, the defender’s right arm moves in a counterclockwise direction, blocking and coming over the opponent’s left arm from the outside. Almost simultaneously, the defender’s left arm also moves in a counterclockwise direction, blocking and coming inside the opponent’s right arm. Then, the defender’s right palm comes up to attack the opponent’s face. Next, in a counterclockwise motion, the left arm is brought underneath the right arm and into the opponent’s neck.



*Figure 4-42 A variation of the last posture and the final position after the head-twisting finish to the last sequence of Suparinpei kata.*

This technique, coupled with the preceding right palm strike, brings the opponent’s head down to the defender’s left side. This is followed by the spear-hand thrust under the opponent’s neck. Then, holding onto the top of the head with the left hand and the opponent’s chin with the right hand, the defender turns to the original front, twisting the head by pushing down with the left hand and pulling (or pushing) up with the right hand. The start of

this sequence, the double-blocking technique, is reminiscent of the “sun and moon” block found at the beginning of the Shodokan version of Seisan kata. Again, giving it such a poetically descriptive name, however, does little to explain its application. And whether we say that Suparinpei, perhaps the most interesting and enigmatic kata of Goju, is based on the movements of the crane or the tiger or the mythical dragon, it does little to explain the applications of kata movements.

Still, they’re beautiful to watch, these creatures we share the world with. It’s hard not to sit down and spend the rest of the day just watching them—the heron stood still in the shallows of the swamp as I watched, waiting patiently for its prey to move within range—but I had miles to go yet.

## Conclusion

With the threat of thunderstorms later in the day, I headed off into the woods early, just after breakfast. It reminded me of a day in late spring. The birds were quite active, which may have just been the hour. I'm not usually out in the woods so early.

About a hundred feet up the trail, I heard the persistent call of what may have been an ovenbird. "Tea-cher, tea-cher, tea-cher." I read somewhere that the ovenbird makes a domed-shaped nest on the ground, among the leaves, something like an old fashioned bread oven, and that that's what gives the bird its name. I didn't stop to look for it though. I love the sound of the different birds, but I'm not much of a bird-watcher; there always seem to be more pressing matters, and anyway, my attention was immediately drawn to a quiet croaking overhead. High up at the top of a dead hemlock tree, a raven was sitting, talking to himself, I imagine, since it didn't seem loud enough for any other ravens and not insistent enough for it to be a warning. Who would the raven be warning? And about what? I certainly wasn't a threat, and from his vantage point, I must have looked pretty insignificant. It's a curious thing to try to imagine what the world must look like to the different inhabitants of the forest. I think a walk in the woods puts a lot of things into perspective.

About twenty years ago, I decided to stop teaching the karate club at the university and start training in the barn dojo in back of my house. We put in a  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood floor and covered it with an old wrestling mat from the university, then added makiwara posts and a heavy bag, a couple of nigiri-game jars, some pictures and scrolls from Okinawa, and began training. At first there were six to ten black belts from the university that were either still around or decided to live nearby for the summer, but eventually, since I had no interest in advertising and trying to run a commercial dojo, it dwindled until there was just me and Ivan. Since there was just the two of us training most nights, we found little need to talk or count out basics or kata. We just trained. Generally, we warmed up on our own and then did a round or two of kata, from Sanchin to Suparinpei. Then we would work on applications, but again there seemed to be little need to talk. We were both

conversant enough with the techniques and observant enough of each other's movement to see what was going on just from the constant repetition of *ippon kumite* drills we did from the techniques in the classical *kata*. I don't know how else to say it, but we got to a point where we could almost tell what the other was thinking simply from how we were moving. We varied it a lot in those days when we were first trying to understand the classical subjects. And since Ivan moved away, I have, after another fifteen years or so, developed that same relationship with Bill.

I was reminded of that sort of silent communication one summer, watching my son Noah play soccer or *calcio* as they call it in Italy. We were staying at a hotel near the airport in Rome on our last night in Italy, since we had an early flight the next morning. We needed to head to the airport at 4 a.m. if we were going to catch our flight home—a grueling twenty-seven-hour exodus, counting layovers, that took us from Rome to Istanbul to Boston.

Noah discovered a small fenced-in soccer pitch in back of the hotel and went down to unwind and kick around a kid-size soccer ball that he found in the bushes nearby. A few minutes later, a group of Italian *polizia* came by with their gym bags and soccer balls, dressed in shorts and soccer cleats. They came after work to play five-a-side games, only this evening they were one player short. They motioned Noah over and invited him to play with them. There were no words, really. The only language they shared was the language of soccer. When I came looking for him, the game was well underway. There were smiles and laughter and high fives. They were good, but the game was played for fun. When Noah had to leave, there were fist bumps and handshakes.

I'm reminded of that camaraderie as I sit here and think back to the seminar I gave in a small village in Italy that summer. It was the same sort of thing. I don't speak Italian, and few of the people at the seminar would be able to understand me if I tried to explain things in English. Certainly Andrea, who initially contacted me after reading some of the articles I had written for the erstwhile *Journal of Asian Martial Arts*, could translate for me, but I didn't think lengthy explanations and sentence-by-sentence translations were what anyone was there for. I thought back to the times I had trained in Okinawan dojos where, for the most part, the only instruction that was actually verbalized was "*Kore wa ko, desho,*" and it was always

accompanied by a demonstration. (I think a rough translation was something like “It’s like this, isn’t it.”) The students were all different ages, from old to young, and from all different styles of karate. But we trained together, shared concepts and techniques, and enjoyed ourselves for two days.



**Figure A-1:** Calligraphy of the third line from the Kempo Hakku (Eight Laws of the Fist) from which Miyagi Chojun sensei took the name Goju-Ryu (“Everything in the universe is breathing, hard and soft”)—a gift from Valentina Varolo, one of the students the author met in Italy.

If soccer has its own language and is indeed international, as my son reminded me after his game with the Italian *polizia*, I think the same might be said of martial arts. There is the silent language of a shared experience and a common understanding, and it is fostered and nourished, I think, through courtesy and respect. And it seems to be something we share as martial artists, regardless of school affiliation or style. So often in these situations, I am reminded of things my teacher Kimo Wall sensei would say. I heard them so often that they have become something of a mantra, and in some ways they all have come to mean the same thing.



*Open mind, joyful training.*

*Replace fear and doubt with knowledge and understanding.*

*Train hard; train often.*

# Appendix: Revisiting the Principles of Kata Analysis (Bunkai)

Some of these principles first appeared in *The Kata and Bunkai of Goju-Ryu: The Essence of the Heishu and Kaishu Kata*.

There are many “principles” one might apply to the study and training of Goju-ryu kata. Some principles have to do with correct martial movement, and many of these principles will hold true across a wide spectrum of martial arts and styles. Other principles, however, have to do with how we can understand a particular martial art and may only apply to how a specific style practices and has preserved the techniques of its system, in this case Goju-ryu. In this appendix, I have listed a number of ideas that I have found useful in analyzing kata. Here is a short list:

Kata are composed of sequences that begin with a receiving technique and end with a finishing technique.

Kata of Goju-ryu show defenses against close-combat encounters typified by grabs, clinches, pushes, and various grappling scenarios.

Since it has been said that there is no first attack in karate—*karate ni sente nashi*—it is important in any analysis of kata to find the initial receiving technique.

The turns, angles, and direction changes in kata are sometimes used to demonstrate how the defender moves off line in response to an attack and are sometimes used simply to signal the beginning of another sequence.

In moving off line, the hand that is closest to the attacker is usually the “blocking” hand.

“Block” the arms, but attack the head.

Both receiving and attacking techniques should seem effortless.

Kicking techniques are low, with knee kicks predominating.

It is important to understand the structure of a kata.

There should be no gaps or pauses in applying the techniques of a kata.

Every technique of the defender in a kata sequence is based on the expected reaction of the attacker to the previous moves of the defender. For example: Middle-level punches predominate in kata because the attacker's head has been brought down to that level with the preceding techniques.

Nothing is really hidden, but how we "see" the techniques of kata is often influenced by our expectations. That is, if our practice primarily consists of blocking, punching, and kicking, then the bunkai we find in kata will largely consist of blocking, punching, and kicking. Keep an open mind.

Some techniques can only be understood if one looks at the space between the end of one technique and the beginning of the next technique.

Bunkai is the analysis of kata; therefore, it stands to reason that to understand the techniques and principles of kata, one should execute the techniques in application exactly the same as one would in the performance of kata.

Each kata is composed of a limited number of sequences, each exploring a different theme or themes.

An elaboration on some of the key points of these principles:

- The kata of Goju-ryu are composed of combinations or sequences of techniques. While this may not be true of all martial systems that use kata or forms (solo routines) to codify and preserve martial techniques, it seems to be true of the Okinawan martial traditions. The techniques within a given sequence, it should be noticed, will differ in intent: some are receiving techniques, some are bridging or controlling techniques, and some are finishing techniques. Receiving techniques, which may sometimes be referred to as entry techniques, are often accompanied by an initial attack. The bridging or controlling techniques are used to close the distance and will

usually involve a movement toward the head of the opponent, often utilizing one hand on the opponent's head and one hand on the opponent's chin, working in opposition to control the opponent's movement. The finishing techniques will show an attack to the neck or a head-twisting technique. The beginning or ending of a sequence—for it is important to understand where one sequence ends and another begins—may be determined by finding the initial “block” or, alternatively, by finding the attack to the head or neck and working backward. Sometimes a change of direction in kata will be used to identify the beginning of a new sequence. Understanding the structure of a given kata is often necessary to determine the techniques involved in a given sequence. Because the structure of kata varies, the techniques of a sequence may be disconnected.

- In general, it would be fair to say that most of the kata of Goju-ryu show self-defense techniques of close combat; that is, the techniques of kata show responses against grabs, pushes, and grappling. Historically, this may have come about from the need for a close-combat system of fighting on the battlefield once a warrior had lost his weapon. This is just a theory, however, to conveniently explain the violent (lethal) nature of the techniques and the seeming scarcity of conventional punching techniques. The kata that most readily lend themselves to this close-combat view—or at least where it is most easily seen—are those kata that begin from a double-arm kamae posture with both arms held up in front of the body; for example, Sanseiru, Seisan, and Suparinpei. However, the primary focus of the remaining classical subjects in the Goju canon is also on close-combat techniques or responses to single-hand grabs, pushes, two-handed grabs, and grappling scenarios.
- There is no first attack in karate—*karate ni sente nashi*. Therefore, in any analysis of kata, it is important to start by looking for the receiving technique at the beginning of each combination or sequence of moves. Often these “blocks” are done simultaneously with an attack or “bridging” technique done with the other hand. In any case, the block, together with the controlling or bridging technique, along with proper stepping, should leave the defender in

such a position that the attacker does not have a second chance to attack.

- When considering the application or analysis of kata movement, one should keep in mind the principles of stance and weight shifting. Turning, changing directions, and the angles in kata should, at a very basic level, give one an indication of how one might employ the waist, stances, rotation, and body positioning against an opponent. The turns and changes of direction in kata indicate the direction of an attack—that is, how one steps off line—or how one must move in order to facilitate the application of a given technique. Too often students attempt to analyze techniques and perform bunkai facing each other squarely, as if they were confined to an empty refrigerator box with an opponent. Generally, we don't turn in order to face the attacker. Sometimes, however, the turns one sees in kata—particularly sequences that may begin from a clinch position—merely show the end of one sequence and the beginning of another. This can be confusing when one is trying to determine whether off-line movement is being shown or whether the kata is merely connecting two disparate sequences.
- To further elaborate on the above point: the stepping—particularly in the initial uke—indicates how the defender steps off line and consequently the direction from which the opponent's attack comes. The principle here is that the attacker is attacking one's centerline and the defender is stepping off the centerline to avoid the attack. This is safer and makes blocking easier. In analyzing kata (or looking for bunkai), how you step off line with the initial block should show you the direction from which the attacker is attacking. The kata shows these steps and movements in a variety of ways and along various angles. What one sees in kata is a demonstration of how one steps off line. The pattern of kata doesn't generally show turns because one has run out of space. However, in some of the higher kata, because they are showing close-combat or grappling sequences, the turns in kata often simply delineate between where sequences begin and end. However, in any case it is important to understand the purpose of the steps and turns in kata. This is also

true of stances; stances—other than Basic Stance or sanchin dachi—are generally used for specific purposes.

- Generally, the hand that is closest to the opponent will be the “blocking” or receiving hand. Additionally, one will notice that while some techniques in kata are practiced on both sides—that is, right-sided and left-sided—most kata techniques are shown in the way a right-handed person would perform them in application. For example, even though the initial movement of the mawashi uke techniques of Suparinpei kata is shown on both sides, the continuation of the technique—the control of the opponent’s arm, the grab of the head, and the left nukite or palm to the chin—demonstrates the way a right-handed person would usually perform the techniques in a clinch.
- Block the hands, protect against the elbow, but attack the head. The attacking techniques of Goju-ryu always seem to go for the head or neck of the opponent. This is the most vital area, but it is also the way to control the opponent. It’s generally much deadlier than simple punch-kick responses. Even middle-level punches are often at this level only because the opponent’s head has been brought down. Even the mawashi uke, as it has come to be known, is generally used as a finishing technique against the opponent’s head and neck when we see it in the classical katas of Goju-ryu. One should remember that the original intent of the techniques found in the classical subjects of Goju-ryu—and, I suspect, in each of the other Okinawan karate systems—was to end a life-threatening confrontation. The techniques are brutal and often lethal; they were not meant for modern-day point tournaments. Any analysis of kata techniques should take this into consideration. This may also be why there is a scarcity of punching techniques to be found in the classical subjects.
- Kicks in Okinawan karate are generally below waist level. Look for the knees of the opponent to be a prime target. Kicks are executed at a level that is difficult for the opponent to block. It should also be remembered that kicks are generally used only after the defender has already moved into contact with the opponent—hence the proverbial admonition to “only kick when you have three feet on the

ground.” That being said, most of the kicking techniques one finds in the classical subjects of Goju-ryu are actually hiza geri.

- Since Goju-ryu is a system of self-defense, when one employs a technique correctly, it should seem effortless. Of course you should put the effort into developing your strength and speed and flexibility when you are young, but the techniques themselves shouldn't depend on strength or speed to work. This is particularly true of the “receiving” techniques of Goju-ryu, which are, for the most part, “soft,” generally meeting the opponent's attack with circular blocks that deflect or neutralize the attack. In addition, the position of the arms first encountered in Sanchin training is applied, in principle, to many of the receiving techniques, and when this “immovable arm” is used in conjunction with stepping off line and the rotation of the trunk, any effort or energy the defender uses can be saved for the counterattack, though these counterattacks may be just as effortless if the same understanding of stepping and rotation is used there as well.
- Understanding the structure of a kata is very important. All kata do not conform to the same structure, so this may initially be somewhat confusing and difficult to figure out. In fact, each of the classical kata of Goju-ryu seems to have a different structure, unique to itself, though there may often be similarities to other kata. This is probably the strongest indication that the different kata come from disparate sources. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the structure of a kata in order to fully understand the kata and the bunkai. In the kata of Goju-ryu, entry techniques together with their controlling techniques are followed by finishing techniques, but the finishing techniques may sometimes only be shown at the end of the second combination or sequence. It should also be noted, however, that in some cases the controlling or bridging techniques may be separated from the initial uke. In other cases, the controlling or finishing technique shown after the second repetition of an initial uke is actually meant to be attached to the first repetition of the entry technique, as we see in Kururunfa and Suparinpei. At other times, the finishing technique for a number of different sequences may only be shown once, at the end of the kata. In any case, it is

important to look at the whole kata, the overall pattern, and not get lost in an analysis of each individual technique as if it were an end in itself.

- Once you have found the combination or sequence of techniques, the movements within the sequence should be continuous and uninterrupted. No gaps. This should apply to the rhythm one uses to execute the techniques of a given sequence as well as physical distance. Once the defender moves into a controlling position, bridging the distance, contact is maintained so as not to allow the opponent a second attack. If contact is broken, the confrontation begins again. However, this does not mean that all techniques are to be done fast, only that there should be no pausing between the techniques of a sequence. When kata is performed for an audience or embukai, it is often performed in a dramatic fashion—some techniques done slowly and others done with much speed and power—with no particular thought to the meaning or application of the moves within a given sequence. However, the “no gaps” proviso should be kept in mind if what we’re trying to convey is an understanding of the movements of a given kata. Some movements in kata are fast and some are naturally slow, but it is all dependent on how we are responding to and manipulating the opponent.
- To find and properly understand the techniques, it is important to “see” (or imagine) how the attacker would respond to each of the defender’s techniques. This takes a bit of imagination on the part of both the attacker and the defender studying bunkai. So often, because we are either schooled from standing in front of a stationary makiwara post or perhaps because we are used to engaging in continuous two-person drills where the agreed-upon idea is not to end the encounter but to continue demonstrating technique, we fail to see how a technique is applied simply because we can’t imagine the reaction of the opponent. And the opponent doesn’t react to the techniques because the opponent is our dojo training partner and we have “pulled the punches.” For example, if we kick the side of the attacker’s knee, it brings the opponent’s head down, and how we interpret the subsequent techniques, though executed at waist or chest height, should consider where the opponent’s head and neck



are. Most of the middle-level “punches” that we see in Goju-ryu actually involve an attack to the opponent’s head or neck because the head has been brought down.

- Don’t look at the final position—the still photograph of a position one might see in an instructional manual—to explain a technique. The real explanation needs to incorporate the movement of “getting there” from the previous position. The circular block one employs may end up in the down (gedan) position, but it may cross one’s centerline (what the attacker is attacking) in the upper or middle level. A technique often begins before you think it begins. In order to understand a technique in kata, it is often best to begin at the end of the previous technique, paying close attention to how the arms and legs and body move.
- In analyzing kata, one should remember not to be unduly influenced by nomenclature. The naming of techniques within kata is an afterthought. At best, the names of techniques serve merely to describe the appearance of the movement, not its application. This facilitates teaching, especially in large group situations, but should not be taken to indicate how a particular technique is meant to be used in an actual confrontation.
- Do the move in bunkai, against a partner, exactly how it occurs in kata. This should include any steps or directional changes. If kata is the means that karate teachers chose to preserve and remember technique, then all of the keys for learning how to apply the techniques are in the kata themselves. Nothing is really hidden. It’s just that sometimes we don’t know what we are looking at. By paying strict attention to the movements of kata, we learn the principles upon which the movements are based. If we choose not to adhere to a strict interpretation of kata when we analyze kata techniques, then we may lose sight of the principles themselves and hamper our understanding of the system and our ability to employ the techniques with any facility whatsoever.
- It has often been said that each kata is a complete fighting system, self-contained, showing responses against a wide variety of possible attacks. However, this view of kata fails to recognize the thematic

nature of kata and the need for a system that contains various kata. Each kata of Goju-ryu actually explores a different theme or shows responses to different kinds of self-defense scenarios. It might also be said that each kata explores any number of different principles. To ignore this aspect of kata—instead, to fixate on the notion that each kata is a complete system of self-defense in itself—may, in fact, lead one to misinterpret the principles themselves. This sort of notion, when it is taken to the extreme, also seems to support the idea that each technique in a kata should be able to end a confrontation, which itself is dependent on the corollary that all of the techniques are the same in intent—no receiving techniques, no bridging techniques, and no clearly distinguishable finishing techniques.

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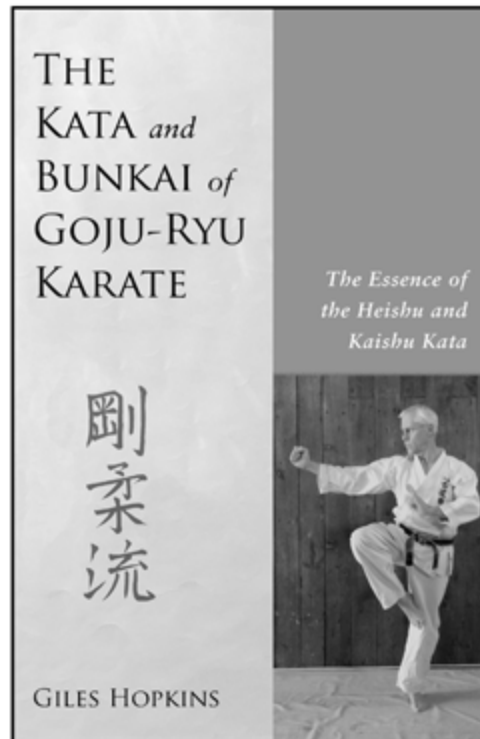
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# About Giles Hopkins



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Giles Hopkins is a longtime karate instructor and the author of many books, including *The Kata and Bunkai of Goju-Ryu Karate* (Blue Snake Books). A practitioner of martial arts since 1973, he holds black belt rankings in a number of styles, as well as sixth-degree rankings and a teacher's certificate in Okinawan Goju-ryu and Matayoshi kobudo from the Zen Okinawa Kobudo Renmei and the Okinawa Kodokan.

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